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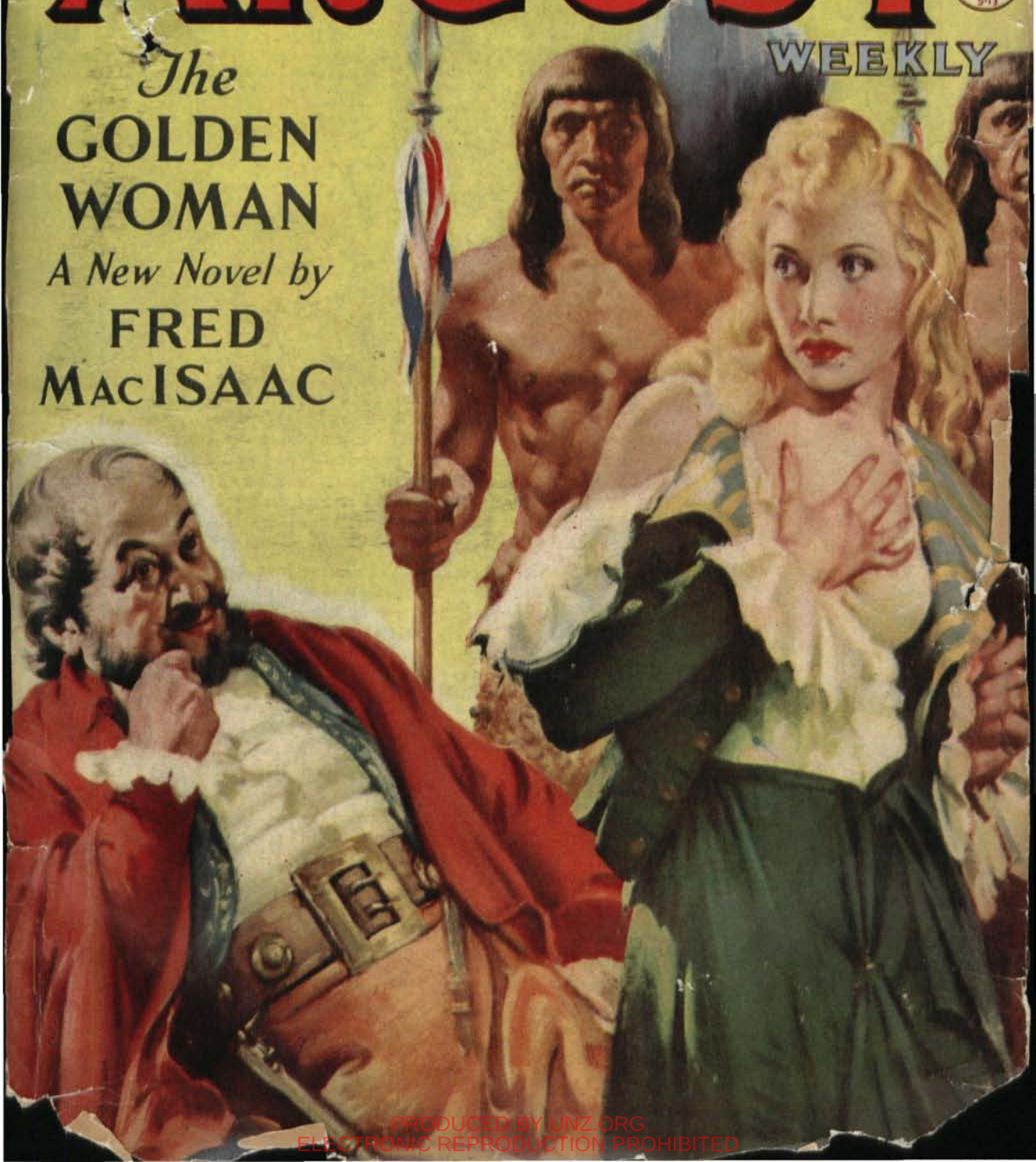

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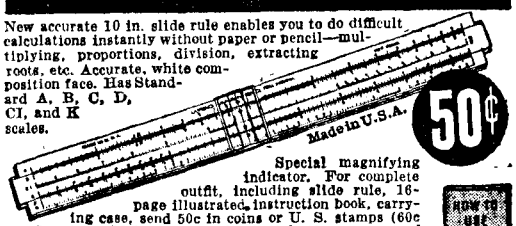

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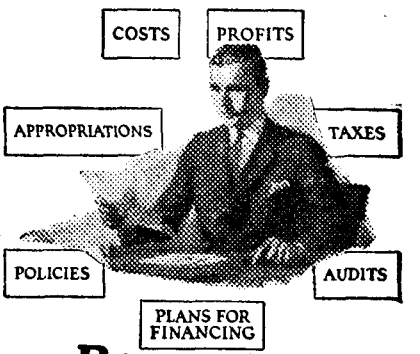

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30x5.25-20	2.95	1.35
31x5.25-21	3.25	1.35
5.50-17	3.25	1.40
28x5.50-18	3.35	1.40
29x5.50-19	3.35	1.45
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The Golden Woman

By FRED MacISAAC

Author of "The Alligator Ring," "The Wild Man of Cape Cod," etc.

Then ho! boys, ho!—we're off to the land of gold. But with a lovely enchantress aboard the bark, there's many an uncharted reef ahead. Beginning a novel of high adventure

THE publication of a manuscript dated 1859 in the year 1939 may seem to require a word of explanation. To accomplish this explanation I must briefly mention some family dates and details which are otherwise unimportant.

The author of the manuscript which follows was my paternal grandfather, Robert Ames, who died in 1910. My father had quarreled with him at the turn of the century and established himself on the West Coast in the state of California toward which Grandfather had set forth in 1850 but upon the soil of which he never set foot.

My father's mother died in 1901 and Grandfather married a second time, a circumstance which widened the breach between father and son. I was born in Los Angeles in 1905 and never saw my grandfather. Upon the death of his second wife in April 1936, the old home in Duxbury, Massachusetts, came to me in lieu of other heirs. What once had been a considerable fortune had dwindled away, and upon visiting my inheritance I found little of cash value—a few antiques, some books, nothing more.

In an ancient locked trunk in a storeroom, however, I came upon a packet of yellowed foolscap covered with a faded script. It appeared to be an account of a voyage by my grandfather in search of California gold. I confess I was not greatly interested when I began to read but my attitude was soon changed. In the early stages I was inclined to believe that my ancestor had been trying his hand at fiction, yet the mass of detail regarding the giant natives of Patagonia gave me food for further thought. At the time when the manuscript was written—the period preceding the American Civil War—very little was known of the interior of Patagonia. In fact, little is now known of this race of Indians which is practically extinct.

I was intrigued by the woman in the story—Laura de Lorme. If she were a fiction character then the old gentleman might have achieved fame as a novelist. And when there entered upon the scene Otalié Antoine the First, King of the Araucanians, with his silver mines and his white slaves, I was lost in admiration. Here was something out of Jules Verne.

I was reading the manuscript in a hotel room in Boston. Upon impulse I laid it down and went to the Public Library to measure my grandfather's yarn by the footrule of facts.

Well, I did not find Laura de Lorme—but I ran across the story of Lola Montez, an adventuress as vivid and picturesque as Madame Laura and one whose career paralleled that of the blonde Will-of-the-Wisp of my grandfather's youth.

And—this statement you can check for yourself—I found Antoine de Tournens, the Frenchman who made himself king of the Araucanians. At least *he* had lived, The Encyclopedia Britannica gave him several paragraphs.

It is my opinion, therefore, that this story of the *Company of Jason* is a veracious narrative. How would it have been possible for a Bostonian of the 1850s to

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The captain bowed low, while we of the Company of Jason stood smitten by her beauty

become aware of the existence of King Otalié Antoine of Patagonia unless through personal contact? Fact or fiction, however, the manuscript deserves a better fate than to mildew for another half century at the bottom of a trunk. I have corrected misspellings but have made no effort to modernize the style. It seems to me that the stiffness and stilt have a certain charm.

Robert Ames, III

CHAPTER I

THE COMPANY OF JASON

ON THE bark *Golden Fleece*—appropriately named, we thought—our company set sail from Boston for San Francisco on the fifth of February 1850, ours being the first expedition to leave New England for California when word of the discovery of gold in that far-off country reached civilization.

We had titled ourselves the Company of Jason, a name suggested by that of the bark, and we were fourteen in number when we engaged passage. Upon the eve of sailing however a fifteenth member was added, this last being one Enoch Stover, son of Obed Stover, an arrogant, close-fisted aristocrat who called himself banker though more aptly he might be dubbed pawnbroker. The elder Stover had meanly ruined my poor father and robbed me of a sizable patrimony thereby. His avarice had forced me to forego an education at Harvard College and to enter a shipping-house as a clerk.

The son I had seen from afar, and naturally I had no liking for him. My indignation at his election to our company knew no bounds and I had protested bitterly against his inclusion. My protests were vain. Stover had a whim to hunt for gold and had contributed twice the stake of any of us, which was five hundred per man, and this influenced the majority. If my own payment, secured by selling all I possessed, had not already been paid I would have withdrawn from the compact. As it was, I accosted Stover when he came on board.

"My name is Robert Ames," I said. "I did all in my power to prevent your admission to our organization and I wish you to know it."

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"Why, thanks for your candor," he replied with an exasperating smile. "For my part, you seem to be a well favored young man and I have no particular objection to you."

"Perhaps you will understand my motives when I inform you that I am the son of Herbert Ames whose ships your father impounded five years ago rather than extend a loan for a few days."

"Ah, a business transaction I presume," he said coolly. "Certainly no affair of mine and hardly of present interest to me."

"I shall do my best to make you regret having forced yourself among us," I replied with heat.

"As you will," he said, "but I don't believe your attitude will irk me in the least."

I considered his attitude a thin veil for contempt. My fists clenched and blood throbbed at my temples. Had we not signed a covenant against duelling I should have challenged him on the spot. As it was I clenched my teeth against further reply and stared after him with righteous anger as he moved away.

Enoch Stover, I am free to admit, was a handsome fellow—tall, well-knit and agreeable in manner. His dark features were straight and well assembled, his shoulders were broad and his costume of blue broadcloth most becoming. It was easy seen, however, that he was haughty, snobbish, purse-proud and spoiled by the attentions of young women who run after the sons of men of great wealth. To do him justice, it is unlikely he knew of the shady transaction which had impoverished my father—no doubt he considered his sire a model of rectitude—but in any event I wanted no dealings with him.

I had not the slighest premonition that this man I hated would share with me amazing vicissitudes and appalling perils, and that more than once we would stand shoulder to shoulder and fight for our lives against common enemies.

OUR bark was a small one with no passenger arrangements. We had discovered her loading for California and her skipper had informed us that if we did not object to poor quarters he would make shift to accommodate us. In our eagerness to arrive while the golden nuggets were still plentiful we accepted his terms.

When we came aboard we found that he had located us between decks amidships, having made portholes to light what was commonly cargo space. Because of our youth and impatience we made no protest. We were eager to be on our way to Eldorado. We arranged our equipment as well as we could and settled down to ignore our present discomforts in visions of the wealth and adventure that lay ahead. One discomfort alone was not easy for me to forget—Enoch Stover.

I anticipated speedy trouble with the interloper and frankly hoped for it. Fist fights were not prohibited though the use of weapons was banned by our code. While the fellow was an inch taller and several pounds heavier than myself, I was certain that the righteousness of my grievance would enable me to handle him, especially as I had done considerable boxing in off hours, and upon one or two occasions had beaten ruffians in tavern brawls.

Stover, however, offered me no opportunity for quarrel. He found among us two or three men of his own class, sons of Beacon Hill residents who sought adventure rather than wealth, needing none. With these fellows he was soon on easy terms. When we came face to face, as had to happen in our restricted quarters, he was most polite, bowing coldly, stepping aside if I had the right of way, but ever wearing upon his handsome face a mocking smile which infuriated me.

As time passed, sound common sense persuaded me that it was unfair to harbor a grudge against a man for an injury committed unbeknownst to him by his father. In the dark hours of our monotonous voyage I came to realize that half of my animosity was due to his superior culture which I might have equalled had I been given his advantages.

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I had never traveled. He had spent two years in Europe. While we were both twenty-five, he had the manners of a man of the world while mine, I fear, were loutish. However, there was no law which compelled me to like him and foregather with him, so I kept my distance. I associated mostly with Abel Church, a boyhood friend who was responsible for my opportunity to join the Company.

Our voyage was uneventful for many weeks as the ship sailed through the tropics. Winds were fair and our spirits high. We played cards in groups for small stakes as it was writ in the compact that we should avoid gambling. In the West Indes ports at which we touched we behaved with exemplary circumspection, and even those among us who had impressed us as over-given to strong drink and brawling did little to justify our apprehensions.

So favored was the bark by wind and sea that we cast anchor in the harbor of Pernambuco upon the twenty-first of March and there we remained a week. It was a hot ill-smelling town and we quickly tired of its brown-skinned inhabitants and its quaint buildings and were impatient to sail.

On the fifth day of our sojourn in port a lighter rowed out to us and a number of workmen came on board who carried heavy packages. The captain conducted them to the cabin where they became busy with hammer, nails and paint. Their packages had contained rich stuffs with which they proceeded to transform the dingy cabin and its two staterooms into palatial quarters.

Our curiosity was overwhelming, and in the hearing of several of the Jasonians I accosted the captain.

"One would think, sir," I said, "that you make preparations for a great lady—"

Captain Perkins removed his high beaver hat and wiped his perspiring brow. I should state that in those days, sea captains were accustomed to wear, upon formal occasions, the top hat and black frock coat.

"Aye, Mr. Ames," he replied. "It is my opinion that women bring bad luck to a ship, but every man has his price. For the five thousand dollars she is paying, I'll risk any sort of evil fortune."

"Then you are to entertain a lady in your cabin, sir."

"Aye, sir. A great lady. One might even say a queen."

"And what queen would board a craft of this sort?" I asked with an incredulous smile.

"Have you heard tell of the Countess Laura de Lorme?" he demanded.

"Faith, no."

"Nor had I until I was informed regarding her by the Governor of Pernambuco whose guest she is. The woman is English but for several years was the favorite of the King of Barnheim, a German principality, the subjects of whom revolted against her and drove her forth. She came to Brazil, and having no fancy for the Portuguese she has decided to establish herself in California. She is rich, so you need not fear her as a competitor in the search for gold, and she pays for her passage nearly as much as all of you put together. I shall take it hard, therefore, if you object to her presence on board."

"This will be a wicked woman, sir," exclaimed Joseph Finch whose father was a preacher in Boston.

The captain hunched his broad shoulders and grinned widely. "You need have no fear she will contaminate you, young man. I suspect she will consider you and your friends as dirt beneath her feet."

Finch, an earnest youth who talked incessantly of the gold he would find in California, the soil of which he never was to see, lifted his voice.

"In the name of the Company of Jason," he cried, "I protest against the presence on board of this wanton."

"You may protest until your beard turns gray," replied the seaman. "The lady sails with us tomorrow."

"You sleep, I presume, in the cabin with this Jezebel," insinuated Finch.

Captain Perkins laughed heartily. "No

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such luck," he assured us. "She has purchased the entire cabin. Besides, I am a virtuous man and married. I shall sling a hammock 'tween decks with the rest of you."

THERE is a portrait of Laura de Lorme in the National Gallery of London, I am informed. A great artist painted it, and some day I hope to see it with my own eyes though I am confident it will be inferior to the original. She looked like a bright angel. Her hair was of virgin gold and there were masses of it. I have seen it unloosed and it fell like a golden shower almost to her knees. Her eyes were large and of the blue of the Equatorial sea. In the voluminous garments of the period, one had to surmise the shape of her limbs but there seemed no excess of flesh on her bones while her complexion was as white as falling flakes of snow.

We were assembled in the waist of the ship to observe her arrival. She came accompanied by a black serving wench and a giant of ebony hue whose hulking form was covered by a white-and-gold uniform and who wore a broadsword at his side.

The impression she made on me was one of sweetness and virginal beauty and I was so enchanted by her that I would have attacked the man who dared utter an insinuation against her.

Abel Church evidently shared my attitude for he said to the others defiantly, "If this woman lived with a king, you may be sure that she was morganatically married to him. Such marriages bring no shame to a European woman."

Stover clapped him heartily upon the back.

"You're right, lad," he declared. "I've heard of this woman during my tour of Europe. They say she was the morganatic wife of the King of Barnheim, and when he tried to put a crown on her golden head his subjects rose in revolt. Gentlemen, I hereby declare that she pleases my eye and I am her champion."

"And I." The words were out before I thought. He smiled at me his mocking smile.

"At least in this we agree," he declared.

I turned and strode forward, the taste of jealousy salt in my mouth. While this lady might be several years my senior, to say that I was not already susceptible to her grace and her charm would be to deny the truth. Stover, doubtless, was already smitten. And with his airs and fancies, his good looks and his knowledge of the countries from whence she came, he speedily would attract her interest while I starved for even a kindly word. It was another score against him.

Already the Companions were agreeing to resist any attempt to quarter the negro slave among us, while the Yankee crew swore that he could not sleep in the forecastle. But we need have had no apprehensions, for the negro slept at night on the deck outside the cabin door without a mat or a pillow.

Naught was seen of the golden-haired woman during the day or evening and, at five in the morning, the bark worked out of the harbor and set all her sails.

Late in the morning our new passenger came on the quarterdeck, wearing a costume of white. She chatted with the captain but made no attempt to descend among us. I should perhaps explain that our ship's forecastle rose above the deck to a height of six feet. The cabin was also above deck level and its roof was called the quarterdeck, upon which one could not venture without permission. Our own exclusive promenade was that part of the main deck aft the main mast, and we could also walk forward and mingle with the crew.

Presently her negro ascended to the quarterdeck, bearing a chair, and she seated herself near the helmsman while the skipper explained the working of the compass and matters connected with navigation.

It occurred to me that the wife of Captain Perkins, virtuous married man that

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he claimed to be, might have objected seriously to his growing intimacy with the blonde siren. I, being a bachelor, would gladly have substituted for him. . . .

Days passed. We saw no sails. We had favoring winds. Because of the heat between decks, we had taken the habit of bringing up our blankets and sleeping upon them in the open air which seemed to do us no harm whatever. We diced a little, we played at cards and we kept our eyes open for view of the golden lady. It appeared that she was confined to her cabin with seasickness which was curious since the ship rolled little. What would she do, we wondered, when we met a gale of wind?

CHAPTER II

THE LADY AND THE DAGGER

DURING the hot weather the door of the cabin remained open in daylight hours and we were able to see that the walls of the dining saloon, where the skipper and mates had been wont to have their meals, were now hung with silken tapestries. Upon the floor was a rug of Oriental weave and there were rich cushions upon the chairs.

At night the door was closed and the giant negro squatted against it. He spoke no English, so none of us could question him about his lovely mistress.

One stifling hot night, however, he was ordered from within to open the door. Presently strains of sweet music were wafted to our ears. Our lady was playing upon a harp, and after a prelude her beautiful soprano voice lifted in song. She sang from an English opera, melodies which I had heard in Boston before we sailed. The opera was called *The Bohemian Girl* and she sang "I Dreamt I Dwelt in Marble Halls."

Our company crept closer, listening breathless, and those of the sailors who were on watch came as near as they dared. Emotion was choking my own throat when she finished this beautiful song, and spontaneously the Jason companions broke into loud and extremely vigorous applause.

To our delight she came to the cabin door. In the moonlight she was a vision from another world in her snowy garments and her halo of bright hair.

"I thank you, gentlemen," she said sweetly, and made us a courtesy. We applauded the more lustily but she withdrew and did not sing again. We learned in time that she had been a soprano in grand opera when she met the King of Barnheim.

Our quarters, as I have stated, were 'tween decks, a space above the hold often devoted to cargo. In bad weather it was obvious they would be most unpleasant but we preferred them to the foul den forward in which the twenty members of the crew were housed. Our accommodations however were most unpalatable to the captain and the two mates, despite the profit they were making by clearing out of the cabin. The mates grumbled constantly, and though the skipper kept his mouth shut his distaste for sleeping in a hammock was easily discerned.

The first mate was a State of Maine man—Slocum by name—a loose jointed tobacco-chewer from Portland. When he spoke it was to the point.

"You young fools think this is a lark," he said. "Wait till you find yourselves in a hurricane. Wait till we batten down the hatches and you have no air to breathe and every roll of the ship knocks you galley west. You were cheated by that old skinflint, Perkins. He had no right to charge you good money for passage and tuck you in black slaves' quarters."

"He's down here with us, isn't he?" I argued.

Slocum grunted. "Yes, while it makes fair weather. When things get bad, the captain will move back into his cabin and choke that yellow haired trollop if she makes a protest."

"The Big Black may have something to say about that."

"He'll be pistoled," said Slocum, ejecting his chew of tobacco. "This has been

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the strangest voyage I ever seen. Weeks and weeks at sea and never a storm or a calm. It can't last."

"If we are battened down," I said curiously, "how will you mates get back and forth?"

He grinned. He had three broken front teeth and his mirth was awesome.

"We'll move into the cabin with the skipper," he said, "and draw lots for Yellow Hair."

I made no reply. The companions had brought on board a plentiful supply of arms and ammunition but had stored them aft at the skipper's command. We had our knives, however, and I thought we might protest effectively against such an outrage as the Down-Easter suggested. I talked it over with Abel Church and he pointed out that if we were hemmed in below hatches we would be helpless.

"Knowing nothing of the sea, though," he added, "we would be swept overboard if we remain on deck in a storm. Also we are mutineers if we disobey any orders."

"The mate was just making talk," I decided. "During a hurricane the captain and his mates will have to remain on deck and they will be much too busy to disturb the young lady."

THAT afternoon I strolled forward and went into the forecastle. It was a musty unclean place which narrowed to a point at the prow and was lined with three rows of berths. I counted them and they numbered thirty. There were also a number of hammock hooks at the far end of the noisome den. Bad quarters, of course, but better than 'tween decks where we should go to the bottom inevitably if the vessel capsized.

"May I come up, captain?" I sang out to the quarterdeck where Perkins was pacing back and forth with his hands behind his back, stovepipe hat at an angle upon his head, long black broadcloth coat unbuttoned, and perspiring greatly in the hot sun. Since the lady had come on board he had not shown himself except in full dress.

"Aye, lad," he said, pleasant enough. "Up with ye."

"Should we have a storm, captain," I said when I had joined him, "would you object if the company moved into the forecastle? There are vacant berths there and places for hammocks."

His craggy face split in a smile.

"It would not occur to me to berth passengers with the crew," he said. "Those swine are no fit companions for gentlemen. But, if you choose to go into the forecastle of your own volition, I will try not to consider you as men before the mast."

Quite elated, I went down and informed my friends of the new arrangement and all their minds were relieved. Thus a careless remark by the bully mate which had aroused our apprehensions regarding the lady had suggested a way in which we might improve our prospects of being of assistance to her. Unfortunately we delayed moving into the forecastle until it was too late.

Day succeeded day. The sun shone always, the skies were without clouds, and the great square sails bellied with favoring winds. For a week it had not been necessary to send men aloft to shorten sail. Long since we had accustomed ourselves to the motion of the ship as she rode the swells of the ocean, and had our fare been good, and our impatience to arrive at our goal less sharp, we would have been content to go on like this forever.

One fine morning the lady came out of her cabin and walked among us upon the captain's arm. She smiled upon us and we scrambled to our feet. We bowed low even while our eyes were fixed upon her with candid admiration.

"Gentlemen," said the grinning Captain, "Madame de Lorme wishes that you all be presented to her since you also go to San Francisco."

She gave us each her hand with a pleasant word. Her voice was soft and sweet though she talked with the excessive inflection of the British people.

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"Thank you, captain," she said. "Since we are now friends, I wish to sit among these gentlemen."

Immediately her black came running with a chair which he placed upon a hatch cover. She sat upon this raised platform like a queen upon her throne and we threw ourselves upon the deck below her and gazed up at her adoringly.

Laura de Lorme smiled like a child as she asked us eager questions, yet there was some quality she had which prevented us from presuming upon her friendliness. She knew little more of California than ourselves, it appeared, but she had letters of introduction to Spanish landed proprietors from grandees of Spain and nobles of Brazil, who were unaware that most of these landed gentry had been run off their estates by unscrupulous Yankee adventurers.

"I am told that it is never winter there but the sun shines all the year round as in Sicily and Egypt," she said.

We received this statement with polite incredulity. Of California we had heard naught save that there was gold there, and it did not seem possible to us New Englanders that snow did not fall and ice did not form in winter. In fact there was packed in my trunk half a dozen sets of red flannel underwear and a coat made of the skin of a bear.

Granting a request from Enoch Stover, she sent for her harp and sang again the haunting melody from the *Bohemian Girl* and afterwards strange tunes in the German and Italian languages, which we did not like so much.

The loose sleeves of her pink gown fell back as she pulled at the strings of a harp painted the color of gold and no more golden than her hair, and displayed soft arms as white as snow and beautiful beyond imagination.

Upon the poop the captain leaned upon the rail, looking down upon the pleasant scene, while the sailors forward stared with mouths as well as ears wide open.

Presently she ended her singing. She laughed deliciously and offered us her hands for assistance down from the hatch cover. I was fortunate enough to secure her left hand. Enoch Stover captured her right.

"Such polite young men!" she exclaimed. "Before the voyage is ended I hope to prove worthy to be admitted to your Company of Jason."

"Dear madame," declared Enoch, "we are not worthy to have you in our company, but if you consent we shall elect you our Queen. Do I speak for you all, men?"

Our answer was a ringing cheer—and thus Laura de Lorme became Queen of our company of adventurers. Compared to her career up to that moment, we were fledglings at adventure, and in comparison with her sophistication we were babes in arms. But this, of course, we none of us knew.

FROM that time on it became her habit to join us for an hour or two each day, and she talked most with Enoch Stover and myself. Thus Enoch and I became rivals as well as enemies. I dreamed at night of winning a great fortune in the mines and making this lovely creature my wife. So, perhaps, did all my fourteen companions, but I feared only Enoch Stover.

Captain Perkins did not look with favor upon our growing intimacy with Laura de Lorme. His age must have been forty-five, and the hard life of a seaman had lined and bronzed his face so that he looked older. There was gray in the black of his hair and side whiskers. Even in the improbable event that he won her esteem, it was not possible for him to offer Laura lawful wedlock, but nevertheless he glowered upon us from his post at the stern. Whenever possible he induced the lovely lady to sit with him upon his quarter-deck where we could not come without the permission which he did not choose to grant.

I do not think that Captain Perkins believed our theory that Laura must have been the morganatic wife of the King of Barnheim. Being an elderly man, cynical

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and hard, he took her for a beautiful wanton who would yield to any man who importuned her sufficiently.

A storm put a stop to our idyll. The sea rose, the wind howled and the ship pitched and tossed like a wild thing. The elements struck us in the night, and when we awoke we found ourselves prisoners in our quarters. There was a small door which gave entrance from the storeroom below the cook's galley to the 'tween decks section, but when we attempted to go on deck by means of it, we found a seaman there who rudely ordered us back and afterwards bolted the door.

He told us that the skipper wished no greenhorns risking their lives on deck during a gale and that we must remain below until the sea subsided. As the air was foul, the motion of the ship speedily made us very ill. When the cook came in with salt pork, biscuits and plum duff for dinner not a man was able to eat.

For five days we lay in that hole, wretched and ill and fearing that with each roll of the ship she would plummet the bottom. At times we hoped she would sink and put us out of our misery. We talked of Laura de Lorme, and remembered the vile insinuations of the mate Slocum, but frankly we were too ill to worry about anybody except ourselves. Slocum entered through the galley door that first night and slept among us, and the other mate occasionally appeared and fell exhausted into his hammock. They reported that the gale was most severe but the ship not in danger.

But as all things must end, so the storm subsided. Upon the sixth morning the hatch covers were removed and the pure air of the sea poured in to cleanse the foulness of our prison. One by one we staggered upon deck and lay there pale and weak, and it was mid-afternoon before we were strong again.

Laura did not appear, but when we went down to dinner we found that the skipper's luggage had been removed and he was no longer to be a member of our dormitory.

According to the steward, Madame de Lorme had invited the captain to occupy one of the vacant staterooms in the cabin, and Perkins was sleeping there after four days and nights without closing an eye.

NOR did the captain return among us as days passed. Slocum winked when he was questioned. "Women are weak," he told me, "and the captain has an artful tongue. This girl is no better than she should be—"

He did not finish for three or four of us were upon him. We hurled him upon the deck and pummelled him with our fists until he whined that he meant no harm. For all he knew, he mumbled, the skipper and the woman were no better friends than before the gale of wind.

That night I could not sleep and about midnight I rolled out of my hammock and went on deck. There was no moon; the wind followed the ship and the sails flapped idly. It was no longer tropical weather but it was not yet cold, and for an hour I leaned upon the rail and looked down into the black sea and shuddered to think of what might be in its depths. I thought of my friends in Boston whom I might never see again, but mostly I thought about Laura de Lorme and prayed that she had resisted the brutal advances of the skipper.

"A penny for your thoughts, Mr. Ames," said a soft thrilling voice and a hand gently touched my right arm. I whirled and faced Madame de Lorme. She wore a silver wrap which covered her from chin to foot and a lace cap rested upon her golden hair.

"Madame," I said simply, "I was thinking of you."

"How sweet! Exactly what were you thinking?"

"I was fearful for you, Madame."

"And why?"

"Fearful that you were at the mercy of the captain."

She laughed, and in the sound I read an ease and confidence. "I am not a poor weak creature. I do not fear him."

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"But he sleeps now in the cabin."

"It is true. When I lay sick during the storm, he sent word that he would be eternally grateful if I would permit him to occupy a vacant room since he had not closed his eyes for days and needed repose. What could I say? I gave him permission, but since that time my black has slept across my stateroom door."

"He loves you, I believe, as do we all."

"That I know," she admitted. "At least he lusts for me. Your company are all my friends, are they not?"

"Your devoted adherents."

"I may need you," she said slowly. "In my bosom I carry a sharp knife. This evening, Mr. Ames, the captain has felt its point."

"He dared?" I cried.

"He was overbold," she said. "He drank overmuch at dinner and he grasped me in his arms and would not let me free. I warned him and then I drove my dagger through his left arm. You may be sure he released me. Afterward I bound up the wound while he muttered apologies. He regrets his ugly impulse he says, yet his eyes are still vindictive."

"You must drive him from the cabin. He is there only on sufferance."

"I—?" she said. "Drive him—?"

"My friends and I will drag him forth."

"No," she said. "You forget that the captain is a king at sea. You are brave men but unarmed. His crew outnumber you. He could hang you all for mutiny and none would question."

"Madame, we would gladly die for you."

She faced me and her eyes were shining. The wind moulded the soft wrap nakedly against her and gave her a beauty beyond any woman I had seen or hoped to see. She lifted upon tiptoes and her soft lips touched my cheek. My nails bit into my palms and my head was filled with a giddiness in that moment with her body so lightly touching against me.

"Thank you, my friend," she said. "I shall manage this. I have let out some of his hot blood and perhaps his false ideas will flow out with it. My negro is loyal and a swordsman and I shall keep to my cabin. Fear nothing—and good night."

For another hour I worried as I paced the deck or leaned on the rail. I recognized that we were almost impotent since Perkins had our weapons under lock and key, and I prayed that her knife might have taught him a lesson. I gloried in the kiss though there was in it only sweet gratitude, nothing of love. However, it distinguished me above the others of the company. I, alone, had felt the touch of her lips.

In the end drowsiness came upon me and I descended to my hammock.

Fearing lest some of my friends commit an indiscretion, I confided my information only to Church who was not only my intimate, but, I think, less infatuated with Laura than the others. He agreed that we must go to her rescue with bare hands if need be but pointed out that she could handle the situation, in all probability.

It seemed to be so. The captain appeared next day with his left arm in a sling and no longer wearing his stovepipe hat and black coat. Laura ceased to come on deck and our delightful musical afternoons became a thing of the past. It was a sweet relief to all of us when on the twenty-fourth of April, after cool days of sailing the higher latitudes, the joyful shout of "Land" came from the foremast head.

CHAPTER III

WE PITCH OUR TENTS

THE food had become vile and a couple of cases of scurvy had broken out in the forecastle. We were almost out of sweet water, and our crying need was fresh vegetables. Our impatience to get ashore after being cooped up on board for nearly seven weeks can be imagined.

News of the landfall brought Laura de Lorme out upon deck. She clapped her hands like a child and rushed among us gleefully asking excited questions.

"The land on the left," I said proudly,

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having secured my information from the second mate, "will be Tierra del Fuego. The low coast on the right is Patagonia."

"How thrilling. I wish to go ashore as soon as possible."

"It is a wild country, I am told," said Stover, who glowered at me, "but armed men have nothing to fear. We shall be delighted to be your escort."

For several hours we approached the coast with a light wind. The breeze failed when we were five miles from the Patagonian shore and we lay becalmed.

Captain Perkins, who long since had ceased to wear a sling upon his left arm and who had donned formal attire for the occasion, descended among us. Laura, seeing him approach, turned her back and walked forward but he affected not to observe the slight.

"Congratulations, Captain," exclaimed Stover. "This means that we have completed half our journey."

The skipper's smile was sour.

"Does it indeed?" he said with a sneer. "Know, young man, that we may be weeks and even months in working through the Straits. We also run dire danger. More ships have been wrecked in this passage than in any other part of the seven seas."

"Oh," Church declared eagerly, "we are a lucky ship. We've made a wonderful passage so far. Only one storm. We'll be through the Straits in a few days."

The skipper eyed him contemptuously.

"You think so? It is my opinion we have used up our luck. The presence of a woman on the ship is an ill omen. Sooner or later we shall meet bad fortune."

With this, the hard visaged and black-souled captain returned to his quarter deck and presently disappeared into the cabin. We speedily forgot his doleful predictions and moved forward in a body to join Laura and rejoice with her.

In two hours a light breeze sprang up and we quickly drew near to land which had a very forbidding aspect. There were no trees, little vegetation and no sign of habitation. We worked in and entered the mouth of the Straits and as twilight fell we dropped anchor. To our requests to be put ashore the captain replied rudely that it would be at his convenience.

When we awakened next morning, an easterly breeze was wafting the bark along and we were running within half a mile of the shore which was on our starboard side. At a place where he happened to know there was a creek, Perkins sent two boats ashore with water casks but refused us permission to stretch our legs on land.

"Getting through the Straits of Magellan," he told Stover in my hearing—I had been careful not to exchange a word with him since Laura had made her revelation—"is purely a matter of luck. No matter how skillful the captain, he is helpless if he is caught here in a heavy gale."

"You were born under a fortunate star," replied Stover gaily. "We have no fears for our safety."

We poked our nose through the first narrows next day and found ourselves in a wide bay where the wind failed us completely. The calm lasted for two days and our anguish increased to see land so near and yet to be cooped up on shipboard. To our requests for conveyance ashore, Captain Perkins turned a deaf ear.

ABOUT noon of the third day, however, the captain came among us with his face wreathed in smiles. "There is no prospect of a wind," he said, "and I know you gentlemen wish to try the feel of land beneath your feet. How would you like to pitch your tents ashore?"

We shouted our satisfaction.

"Very well," he stated. "As it is a savage country you had better take your rifles and ammunition. I'll have two boats made ready immediately."

Laura had come out of the cabin and stood a little distance away.

"Captain Perkins," she said resolutely, "I wish to go ashore with the Company of Jason and camp for the night. I have never camped. It will be an experience."

He looked at her coldly. "You are mistress of your actions," he said. "I warn

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you that it is a barren, disagreeable country with ferocious savages abounding."

"Pshaw! I heard you say that the men will go ashore armed."

"If the gentlemen wish your company, I have no objections," he replied and went directly into the cabin.

"Your costume, madame," said I politely, "is hardly fitted for roughing it."

"I have a riding habit of green," she replied eagerly. "I shall have my maid shorten the skirt so I can walk in it. Please, gentlemen, take me with you?"

You may imagine that we did not deny her.

One hour later we piled into the boats, shouting, laughing, gleeful, and the merriest of all was Laura de Lorme who seemed strange to us in a skirt which revealed slender hips and which fell only to the tops of her polished riding boots. Strange, but infinitely more beautiful.

Our equipment for California included tents, four of which we had ordered placed in the boats. We had our untried guns with rifled barrels and fifty rounds of ammunition, for we had the most extravagant ideas of the quantity of game we might kill.

"Give way," shouted the boatswain of the boat which held Stover, Church, myself, Finch, Homer, Fields, Lawson and Laura de Lorme. The sailors dipped their oars and we shot away from the ship. The other boat was close behind us.

"Look," cried Laura. "Indians."

She was right. A score of figures had assembled upon the beach; several on horseback. They were clad in skins, they seemed not to be armed, and as the boats grounded on the sand they fled although we made peaceful signs.

"It is very fortunate that we brought weapons," I said to Church.

He laughed. "One man with a gun could drive thousands like sheep before him."

We determined to make our camp upon a slight rise about a hundred yards from shore. With a right good will the sailors set to work to pitch our tents and bring up our supplies which were scanty since we would return to shipboard in the morning. This done, they wished us good hunting and rowed back to the bark.

For an hour we romped about like children. While Laura sat upon a hummock and laughed at our antics, we played leapfrog, threw stones at one rock superimposed upon another and gambolled joyously. Tiring of this, we threw ourselves upon the ground and looked about us.

We had landed upon a steep beach of brown sand flanked by huge piles of rock. The country hereabouts was of the rolling variety with low hills in the background. Tall grass covered it desolately. Captain Perkins, who had been through this way before, had informed Stover that there was a small river which emptied into the sea about half a mile west, but as there was no beach in that vicinity and as we had a keg of water in our provisions which was ample until morning, we had not bothered about running water when we made camp.

I looked for the river but it was not visible from where we were and I thought no more about it.

We lunched presently upon supplies from the ship and allotted one tent to Madame de Lorme. After lunch we drew lots to see who should go hunting. Stover, who tacitly assumed command, warned the lads not to separate on account of the Indians whose nature was supposed to be cruel and barbarous. I was a loser, though in my own opinion a winner, for I was drawn to remain behind as were Lawrence and Harper and Finch.

The others moved in a body inland and speedily disappeared from view because of the curious nature of the country which appeared to be open but abounded in gullies and ravines and such.

Laura entertained us for hours by kindly answering our questions about Europe. She had met the young Queen of England and confided to us that Victoria was no beauty. She had talked with Napoleon's nephew, Louis, who was the coming man in France, afterwards making himself Emperor, as we all know.

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It was strange to hear tales of the fascinating old world upon this barren stretch of country at the bottom of the Wesern Hemisphere, and I put the thought into words.

"It is just as much terra incognito," I told the others, "as the day more than three hundred years ago when Magellan first penetrated the Straits. While thousands of ships have passed since, none have explored. The only landings have been like ours, or to get fresh water for vessels."

"There will be a steady stream of ships from now on," Finch remarked.

"No," I replied. "For as soon as they build the railroad across Panama all California traffic will pass that way and save many months of ocean travel. These Straits will be deserted again as they were in Magellan's time."

"Save for our ship," said Laura, "they are deserted now. It is adventure, gentlemen. Don't you love it?"

THUS the afternoon waned and the sun began to sink. At the same time a breeze came up. "Perhaps the captain will send for us," our golden lady said. "If there is wind he can sail on."

"Ships always anchor at night in these Straits," I replied, "but we may be routed out early in the morning."

Dave Lawrence stood up and wet the palm of his hand.

"It's a west wind," he called. "It will not benefit our ship. She will remain here perhaps two or three days."

"I wish to see the Indians close to," Laura declared. "I have heard that the Patagonians are giants eight and ten feet tall."

"Those fellows who ran away," I replied, "were men like ourselves. I doubt if any of them were over six feet."

About that time our hunters returned with crestfallen expressions and empty game bags. They had raised a few wild birds but had seen no animals, and though there were small fish in the river which they had stumbled upon, they had no fishing tackle. Thus our hope of dining on geese or turkey or venison went aglimmering and we lighted a campfire and again munched the obnoxious salt pork.

Presently we had finished and we chatted gaily around our fire for several hours before we turned in.

Night watches had been arranged and I was called at four in the morning. Very sleepy I was, and cold, when I rolled out of the blankets. I took my gun and paraded up and down lest I give in to drowsiness. The fire was out and a chill wind was blowing. It was almost the first of May, which is equivalent to the first of November in New England latitudes, and presently it would be winter in Patagonia, though by that time, we fondly hoped we would be sailing up the coast of Chile and entering the tropical section of the world.

The hours passed slowly. If there were Indians prowling about our camp, they gave no evidence of their presence. The distant howling of animals was mournful and eerie, and before dawn I became aware of another sound:

The squeaking of pulleys and the creaking of blocks—

Captain Perkins was up and about and ready for his opportunities though it seemed to me that the wind was coming out of the Straits and not into them. Morning began to dawn and the tall masts and square yards of the bark were dimly outlined against the gray sky. As the horizon deepened into rose I saw the white sails lifting on the yards. Presently the boats would put off and bring an end to our pleasant break in the monotony of sea-faring. I yawned and paraded on.

Half an hour passed. Now the sails were set and filling on the lower yards and the bark was tugging at her anchor.

Ah! The creaking of the windlass as the crew began to pull the hook out of the mud! I heard faint strains of a chantey sung by the sailormen, and that was enough. I fired off my gun and ran headlong for the beach.

The companions poured out of their

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tents, their eyes heavy with sleep, their guns in hand. They stared about for the cause of the alarm and saw me capering wildly upon the shore. And then they saw that the *Golden Fleece* was moving through the water. She beat up into the wind, came about and stood out for the open sea, though a dozen guns were fired on the remote possibility that Perkins had lost his mind and had forgotten that his passengers were in camp ashore.

By this time, all save Laura were beside me on the beach and evincing in every way their anger and apprehension.

From the ship came no sound whatever. We could see the figure of Perkins on the poop and we saw him wave toward us a derisive hand.

Abandoned! Marooned! Left upon a coast teeming with ferocious savages. We raved and swore impotently until Stover told us to halt.

"Let's go back and have breakfast, men," he said. "The scoundrel is afraid to tackle the Straits of Magellan but other ships will be along. All California-bound vessels must pass in sight of us. Our state is not desperate."

"Yes," said Church goomily, "but other skippers will not want to carry us to California, or at least they will make us work our passage."

I said nothing. It had occurred to me that Perkins had bided his time and plotted this revenge for the knife thrust given him by Laura de Lorme. The Company of Jason had not offended him, but he could not persuade her to go ashore except we went along. To his hurt pride and frustration he had sacrificed us all without a qualm.

CHAPTER IV

THE HORSEMEN OF THE WILD

LAURA was standing before her tent as we disconsolately returned. She had watched the ship sail away and needed no information from us to reckon the extent of our disaster. In the circumstances we might have forgiven her any sort of womanly hysterics, but instead her cool poise was a model for the rest of us.

"It would appear, my friends, that we have been abandoned," she said calmly.

"Left to shift for ourselves by that scoundrel," Stover told her.

"But why—why?" shouted Abel Church. "I cannot understand his motives. His hold is filled with merchandise which will be very profitable if delivered in California, yet he cannot go there and discharge without explaining the disappearance of his passengers. My letter of credit was sent via the Isthmus a week before we sailed. My banker will demand what has become of me."

"And mine," said Stover. "My father sent out a thousand dollars which I can draw upon if aught goes wrong."

"Do you know the limit of his profit for his cargo?" asked Laura gently.

"I suppose it will come to thirty or forty thousand dollars."

She laughed. "But there are the dangers of the Straits and the perils of the Pacific to be faced before he delivers it. My dear friends, he has thought of a way to make more money."

"How?" we demanded.

"In my chest in the cabin, guarded by my black slave, are ten thousand pounds in gold. There are jewels presented to me by a certain great personage which are worth fifty thousand pounds. This rascal will run his ship on a rock, land with his villainous crew, make his way to Buenos Aires or Rio de Janeiro with my treasure, go to Europe and vanish from our ken. Little he cares whether we are picked up and conveyed to California by another vessel or are devoured by cannibals. Perhaps, now, you understand his motives."

White of face we gazed at one another, and presently I asked a question.

"Madame," I said, "We are mostly young men of little means who seek to better our condition by finding gold. You, it appears, are immensely wealthy. There was no need for you to go to California."

"Civilization sickens me," she said shortly. "And my life was not safe in

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Europe. As for means, I am now as poor as any among you. What are we going to do?"

Stover spoke up. "In a week or two weeks or a month, a ship will come through. We shall signal her and be taken aboard. If we are fortunate she will be westward bound. We shall camp here, keep a constant watch and very shortly we shall be rescued."

I nodded approvingly.

"They will make us work our passage," I said, "but you will be well treated, madame. So confident I am of what Stover tells you that I suggest we refuse rescue except by a westbound vessel."

She laughed clearly and musically. "If that is the case, our lives, at least, are safe. Let us cook our breakfast."

While we were squatting around our campfire, partaking of the coarse fare, we became aware of the approach of a number of horsemen who drew rein beyond gunshot and watched us curiously. Presently one of their number dismounted and walked toward us.

We eyed him curiously for he was the strangest human we had ever seen. He was very tall, fully six feet eight or ten inches. His skin was not copper colored like our northern savages, but a sort of bluish brown. His mass of black hair extended down his forehead nearly to the eyes. It was long and separated so that it fell in two folds over his shoulders. He had high cheekbones, a hook nose, and as he approached he smiled propitiatingly to show us an expanse of white teeth.

He wore a single garment made of the skin of a cougar, or South American lion, and his legs and feet were bare. He was as powerful in appearance as he was tall and looked capable of picking up any man among us and rending him limb from limb.

A DOZEN paces distant he stopped and spread out his arms. He called out a question in a tongue strange to me. Stover, who had spent a year in Spain, answered him quickly, however, and they held a short conversation. The native then swung about and walked back to his companions.

"What did he say?" demanded Jay Lawson eagerly.

"He asked me why the ship had sailed away without us. I told him it was coming back, a lie which may be useful."

"And what else?"

"He said he and his tribe were the friends of white people, not like other tribes who would kill us for our weapons. He invited us to accompany him to his village."

Laura clapped her hands. "Let us go," she pleaded. "That would be thrilling."

"On the contrary," replied Stover, "we must immediately shift camp to the bank of the stream above so that we may be sure of fresh water. We can see a vessel from there as well as here. That savage struck me as exceedingly untrustworthy."

"You are right," David Lawrence declared. "Let them get to close quarters and our weapons would be useless. I never saw such a powerful brute in my life."

"To work at once," commanded our self-appointed leader. His suggestion, however, was eminently wise and we proceeded to break camp in a hurry. We loaded our tent poles and canvas and stores on our backs and in twenty minutes were prepared to move. The horsemen followed us as we marched, drawing unconsciously closer and closer.

"They must be taught a lesson," said Stover. He lifted his rifle, discharged it into the air, and the sharp explosion produced a result that was all that could be hoped for. The natives turned their horses about and galloped away.

We reconstructed our camp upon the high bank of the little river, about a hundred yards from the place where the stream flowed into the ocean through a narrow canyon some fifty feet deep. From this vantage we had a clear view of the sea and we could bring up fresh water without difficulty. The purity of the water was assured except at high tide. (I may

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state that the rise and fall of the tides at this place was almost as great as at the Bay of Fundy. At low tide the river's mouth was a cataract twenty or thirty feet in height. At high tide the ocean was level with the top of the waterfall.)

The tents up, we ruefully considered our circumstances. We had food enough for another day if we went upon rations. We had no change of clothing, a limited supply of ammunition, and insufficient blankets to keep us warm in really cold weather which soon would be upon us. Moreover, in our care was a very delicate, refined and helpless woman who must not suffer privation. Had we not had reason to expect a ship at any moment, we would have despaired.

"I propose we elect a commander of this organization," I suggested after we had taken count of stock. "We would have elected a president when we arrived in San Francisco. Let's do it now."

"Good," cried Lawrence. "I nominate Enoch Stover as the man among us whose suggestions have been excellent up to now." Without a dissenting voice, Stover was placed in command.

He stood up, handsome and self-assured, bowed to Laura de Lorme and addressed us.

"Our situation is critical," he said. "We must assume that we may have to remain here some time and make our plans accordingly. Our immediate need is fresh meat and I propose a more serious hunting party than that of yesterday. That Indian wore the skin of a lion which means that there is game in this country and wild beasts which are dangerous to hunters. Most of us are city bred with little skill in firearms. Our ammunition is precious and bullets must not be wasted. Who among you is confident that he can hit what he aims at?"

"I'm a good shot," I asserted. "I have a marksman's medal from the First Militia Regiment of Massachusetts."

"Then you go, Ames," he said cordially. "I will come myself since I have considerable skill. Three others."

After some discussion he chose Rankin and Lawrence and Church, and we five set out after Stover had instructed the others on no account to leave camp and to keep a close watch for hostiles.

"WE HAD better follow the river," Stover said as we proceeded. "Animals come down to drink and are less on guard than at other times."

We stalked along warily for a few miles without result when suddenly there sprang out of the long grass ahead two creatures so fantastic that we merely gaped at them instead of bringing our pieces to shoulder. They were gigantic birds with enormously long necks and legs and they ran off with the speed of race horses.

"Ostriches!" exclaimed Stover, "though I supposed that they were African birds not to be found in this hemisphere." (Ostriches were exactly what they were, though, as we later discovered. They are called cassowaries in South America but differ little from their African cousins.)

At some distance further along we observed a disturbance in the bushes and a four-footed animal emerged and dipped his snout in the stream.

"Get him, Ames," whispered the chief. I crept upon the beast who was something like a deer but larger, and with a longer neck and a hump like a camel. Fortunately the wind was toward me and I was within thirty yards before my presence was discovered. The beast darted away too late. A single shot brought him down, and with shouts of delight we hunters rushed upon my prey and surveyed him as he twisted in his death agonies.

He was like no other beast that we had ever seen—part deer, part camel. It turned out that, inadvertently, I had killed the choicest eating animal in Patagonia, the guanaco whose flesh is very much like venison.

"Food enough for several days," said Stover. "We will have a job to get him back to camp though."

We managed, however, by tying his legs together and running a stick between them.

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Two men placed the stake on their shoulders and made shift to carry him. As he weighed nearly two hundred pounds we had to spell one another frequently.

Had we not been near the river we never could have located our camp but we had not traveled far before we had other means of guidance. A gunshot was heard, faint and far-away. As we paused in consternation a second shot sounded—another, and then a volley.

"An attack," exclaimed Stover. "They can beat them off. We must get the meat home. All the more reason if the savages are harassing us so soon."

The gunfire died away which caused us even greater apprehension, but when we had almost decided to abandon our prize for the sake of greater speed, we heard the fusillade again.

Eagerly we hastened on.

The sides of the canyon were lifting as we drew nearer to camp and Stover climbed the steep bank to get a sight of what transpired. We saw him shading his eyes with his hands as he gazed westward and we waited anxiously. There were no more gunshots, and after a few minutes he scrambled down.

"I can see the ocean," he said, "but I couldn't see the tents. Put down that biological curiosity and cover it with bushes. We'll push on to camp as fast as we can and return for it later."

At a rapid pace we moved along beside the river until we could see the ocean not far ahead. It was beginning to grow dark as we climbed the steep bank and worked toward the encampment.

Stover came to an abrupt halt.

"They should be over there," he said. "On top of that elevation. We cannot have lost our way. This is our river."

We broke into a run. We strained our eyes. There was no question whatever that we were back where we had started from—but now the tents were gone. The top of the mound was deserted.

There were the ashes of our fire. There were the stakes which we had driven into the ground to hold the tent ropes. And what was that in front of us? It was a limp and huddled body. . . .

STOVER and I knelt beside the earthly remains of Joe Finch, the preacher's son. We could see no wound, but coiled around his neck was a leather rope at each end of which dangled a stone weighing about a pound. We removed this thong hastily but the poor fellow's neck had been broken. The manner of his death was a mystery to us, for we had never heard of the bolas, most effective weapon of the Patagonian Indian.

Thirty feet away our friends had found another body, that of poor Jay Lawson. His head had been split by the stroke of a heavy sword or sabre and he was a ghastly sight. It was the first time I had looked upon men who had met a violent death and my knees shook and I felt myself about to faint.

"Pull yourself together, Ames," said Stover. "These two may be the fortunate ones. Great God, what will they do to Madame Laura?"

"It doesn't look as if they put up any defense," said Church gloomily. "Not a dead Indian in sight."

"We heard the shooting," replied Stover. "They did what they could. I would say they were overwhelmed by a rush of horsemen. Once they beat them back, but the Indians charged again before they had time to reload. This diabolical weapon looks as though it was capable of being hurled from a considerable distance." He examined the bolas.

"But they might have accounted for a few of them."

"None of them are expert marksmen, and it is likely that the savages carried off their dead and wounded along with our companions." He wagged his head and clenched his fists. "The poor woman! Oh, the poor girl!"

I knew Stover was as much infatuated with Laura as myself and I admired his self-control which had a good effect upon me.

"They are in the hands of the Pata-

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gonians," I stated. "They may figure upon holding them for ransom in which case they will treat them well. As men, we must attempt a rescue."

"Fool," sneered Rankin, who was a dark saturnine fellow with a harsh and ready tongue. "We once were fifteen—now we are five. There were ten guns here to defend madame, and they failed. How long do you suppose it will be before we also are dead or prisoners?"

"And what do you suggest?" asked Stover angrily.

Rankin hesitated. "I admired the woman and I love our friends as you do," he said. "But we are afoot, the savages are horsemen. We have no notion of the direction of their village, and should they rush us we can fire five shots before we are helpless. It seems most reasonable to hide in the vicinity until a ship appears and persuade the ship's company to effect a rescue. However, I will do what the majority decides."

"There is reason in your argument," admitted the leader. "But the savage who visited us counted our numbers and knows that we five are at large. They will expect us to take the coward's part and hide near the beach in hope of signalling a ship. Early in the morning they will run us down. A bold course seems best to me, though I admit there is little hope for us whatever we do."

"As there is a lady concerned," said Abel Church in his stolid fashion, "we have no choice, Rankin. At any cost we must attempt her rescue. I believe we are doomed men, so it is better to be slaughtered fighting than be hunted down like skulking dogs."

"Agreed," said Rankin. He gave a bitter laugh. "I had counted upon finding my fortune in California gold—but let it pass. It will be death for us in Patagonia."

Stover turned and examined the sites of the tents.

"They have taken everything," he said. "Not a blanket left, not a biscuit. And they have ten rifles though I doubt if they know how to use them. Who has matches?"

I drew a waxed-paper package from my pocket. Rankin also had a packet.

"Guard them carefully," said Stover. "I suppose never were men more poorly equipped to support themselves in the wilds than we."

He spoke true enough. We had come ashore in the heavy frock coats and cloth caps with glazed visors which were suitable for seafaring. Our boots were light, and because the weather had been hot until very recently we had not donned our winter flannels.

In a manner entirely different from his usual confident and arrogant way, Stover spoke. "If I am still your leader," he said, "may I make a suggestion?"

His eyes met mine squarely. "I believe you were appointed leader by popular vote," I said stiffly.

"My first order has resulted in a disaster," he answered, meek enough.

"Mr. Stover," I said firmly, "I make no criticism. We had to secure food. If I had been in command, I would have ordered the hunting party."

Lawrence spoke: "You were entirely justified in supposing that men with guns could beat off an attack by savages. What is your suggestion, captain?"

A glint of moisture came into Stover's eyes. "Thank you gentlemen. I especially thank you, Mr. Ames. We must eat to gain strength, and I suggest we recover that animal we killed. Hidden by the canyon walls we may light a fire and cook part of it. When dawn comes we shall try to locate the native village and do what best we may, God willing!"

CHAPTER V

WE WAIT THE DAWN

WE HASTENED away from the scene of the tragedy, determined to return later and bury the bodies of our unfortunate companions. By then it was almost dark, and it was largely by accident that we stumbled upon the carcass of the dead guanaco.

In a few minutes we had collected small

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branches from the scrub growth at the river's edge and lighted a fire. With our pocket knives we cut slices from the animal, broiled them, and found to our satisfaction that the meat had an agreeable flavor. We then extinguished the fire and huddled together for warmth.

There were other agonized nights that we would endure later but none of them is as miserable in my mind as this one. Our hopes were at lowest ebb and our fears as sharp as a razor. We were all familiar with the novels of Fenimore Cooper which exploited the skill of the red Indians at following a trail and we were filled with apprehensions lest the Patagonians might even now be creeping down upon us.

Even Enoch Stover showed the strain he labored under, and from this fact I drew some small easement for my own qualms. Rankin maintained his surly silence but I noticed that he chewed mechanically upon a piece of bark. He was not a pleasant companion, this lantern-jawed Cape Codder, but in the end he proved himself a brave and steadfast man. Tow-headed Abel Church and David Lawrence, who was younger than the rest of us and less in strength, kept up a constant nervous whispering between them.

I stood the first watch and the others lay down to seek what uneasy sleep they might find. At the end of an hour Stover crept to my side.

"Ames," he said, "you hate me for reasons concerned with a transaction of which I have no knowledge. I have avoided you during the voyage because I set you down as a sullen, spiteful fellow. It is my belief I can whip you in a fist fight or defeat you with any weapon you choose, yet I would not quarrel with you."

"What is the purpose of this preamble, please?" I asked sharply.

He managed to laugh. "I want to propose a truce. We are in sore straits and our lives depend upon harmony. I appreciate your attitude this afternoon when I admitted my error in dividing the party. If you desire to lead the remnant of us, I shall make no objection."

This was so straightforward and manly that my resentment faded.

"I think you are better qualified to lead," I told him. "Nor do I consider that you erred. I dislike you for reasons apart from our fathers' business transaction. I don't think you can beat me with fists. But nevertheless I'll make a truce."

"Good man," he said warmly. "I propose to rescue Madame Laura or die."

"As do I," I asserted.

We grasped hands in the dark. "You made it plain on the ship that you loved the lady," he said. "Well, I cherish a like sentiment. When the time arrives that she is free from peril I'll fight you for her."

"I'm not fool enough to think I can win her," I replied. "Have you so an absurd a hope?"

"I do not consider it absurd," he answered proudly.

I smiled in the dark. "If there is hope for you there is hope for me," I told him.

When he had gone I sat and listened to the small sounds of the wilderness night. How unlikely, I thought, that the lady would reward either of us with her fair hand, even assuming that we did deliver her from captivity. She who was a friend of kings and princes! And then I thought how unlikely it was that we should ever see her again, since at any minute the savages might burst upon us from the bush, and despite the chill wind there were beads of perspiration upon my forehead.

But during the night no such dreadful thing happened, and at dawn we were ready to move. At Stover's suggestion, we lighted our fire and cooked a considerable quantity of meat which we wrapped in leaves and bestowed in our numerous pockets.

"We'll try to pick up their trail and locate their village," stated Stover.

"And then what?" asked Rankin scornfully.

"Attack it."

The fellow laughed coarsely. "Lead on," he invited. "The sooner we make this attack the sooner we shall all be dead men."

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AT THE ruined camp we found their trail led eastward. We delayed half an hour to dig a shallow grave in which we deposited our dead comrades, then set grimly forth.

In half an hour we had lost sight of the ocean and were moving through long grass which came to our knees. It appeared that we could see ahead of us clear to the horizon, but at the end of two hours we were astonished to observe a body of horsemen who seemed to have sprung right out of the earth and who were less than a mile ahead.

"Down," commanded Stover, and we fell upon our faces, ready to sell our lives dearly.

We waited anxiously as the cavalcade approached. There were fully fifty of them and they passed within a hundred yards without being aware of our presence. They were all big men. To be conservative, I will say that they must have averaged four inches above six feet. They were clad in skins of various animals, mostly the guanaco, and their dark legs were bare.

The small size of their horses accentuated the stature of the riders for the shaggy beasts were not much larger than ponies. They rode, not bareback like the Plains Indians of our country, but upon rude saddles made of wood. A single rein tied round the lower jaw guided their steeds. Strapped to bare heels were spurs, cruel things made of six-inch sticks of wood in which iron nails had been driven.

Their arms were swords, mostly without scabbards, and dangling from their saddles were the weighted ropes, or bolas, which had broken the neck of one of our comrades. There was not a firearm in the company, not a bow nor arrow.

They had passed us when we had a chance to see the method of making use of the bolas. An ostrich started up ahead of the band and darted at great speed toward the right. One of the riders pursued. Holding one of the stones in his hand, he whirled the other rapidly about his head until the connecting thong was invisible. At thirty yards he released the weight in his hand and the missile sped through the air. The rope struck the long neck of the bird, coiled like a snake, and the weights delivered deadly blows. The ostrich toppled down in the grass.

We gazed at the feat in amazement. Although the bird had fallen not eighty feet from where we lay, the hunter remained unaware of our presence. Riding his mount at top speed he bent down to lift the heavy bird from the ground. He threw it across his saddle and galloped after his fellows.

In a few minutes they had disappeared from view as the ground fell away, but a quarter of a mile off they again came in sight, vanished, and were not seen again.

"That party has been sent out to find us," I hazarded as we rose to our feet.

Stover nodded. "Which proves the wisdom of our course. Men, I believe that fortune favors us. This may be the fighting force of the village, which is left undefended. On."

We moved forward rapidly, and in another hour sighted a cluster of two score tents at the bottom of a vast hollow. They were huddled together, not conical like Indian wigwams, but shaped more like army tents except that the material was skins instead of canvas.

At first we thought that the village was deserted but soon we discerned dogs moving about and a group of children came into view, stark naked. As we drew nearer we saw a score of horses in a rude corral.

There were no sentinels, apparently no apprehensions.

"Down," commanded Stover. "This is my suggestion."

(Let me state here that, in making our preparations for life in California, a gun salesman had persuaded us to purchase some German weapons which had come to hand. These were the needle guns, just introduced in the Prussian Army, which had the advantage of loading at the breech instead of at the muzzle like our American rifles. Our salesman had urged that this weapon could fire several bullets in the time required to load the ordinary rifle,

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but the best argument for the weapon had not occurred to him. It was possible to replace a cartridge while lying flat on the ground, while the muzzle loader compelled a man to stand as he jammed the bullet home with his ramrod.

This, of course, was a crude weapon compared to the Winchester repeating rifle which now hangs in my study, but it was the base of Stover's plan.

I may say that the disadvantage of the needle gun was this: when the supply of ammunition which the salesman sold us was exhausted, it would be impossible to replace it in a wild country. Had we ever reached California we should have had to throw the useless weapons away.)

"We shall creep up close to the village," Stover said. "Lying flat, we shall fire into it. I first, Ames second, Rankin third, Lawrence fourth, and Church fifth. By the time Church has fired, I shall have reloaded."

We nodded agreement and on hands and knees crept through the long coarse grass toward the settlement. At a hundred and fifty yards we attracted the attention of a dog who barked lustily and came to investigate.

"Now," Stover cried. He pulled trigger and the explosion was deafening. In rapid succession we followed his example.

THE result was astonishing. Out of the tepees poured multitudes of women and naked children. They were shrieking in terror, bewildered, peering in every direction for the source of this strange thunder. As a pall of smoke hung over the spot where we lay, they quickly discerned it and stampeded in the opposite direction. A few of the women sprang upon horses but most were too panic stricken to pause at the corral. Within a few brief minutes we could see the mob, a hundred or a hundred and fifty strong, disappearing over the top of a rise beyond.

Apparently it had not entered the thick heads of the warriors that an attack might be made on the camp, and save for a few old men who had joined in the hasty retreat, no one had been left behind to protect the women and children.

We were up and running into the settlement. It had been so easy that we could hardly credit that we had captured it with four or five shots which had injured nobody.

At the first hut we paused.

"Our friends must be in one of these," said Stover. "Keep together, though—we shall have time to inspect them all."

He lifted a guanaco skin which served as an entrance curtain and peered inside. It was foul and noisome, for a fire smoldered and there was no roof opening to permit the escape of smoke. In the darkness we could discern little at first but soon we made out two women, naked as the day they were born, who huddled upon the ground, faces buried in the dirt.

"Where are the white men and the white woman?" demanded Stover in Spanish.

There was no answer. They cowered and shivered but did not lift their heads.

"Not here," he said curtly. "Come on."

We looked into three empty shacks and then came upon one much larger than the others. There were two children here and a boy of sixteen, and piled near the entrance something which delighted our eyes, the rifles of our comrades and their cartridge boxes.

"Señores," exclaimed the boy in Spanish. "I am white. Save me. Take me with you?"

"Where are the men and the woman who were captured yesterday?"

The captive spread his hands in an eloquest gesture. "Gone, *señores.*"

"Have they killed them?"

"No," the boy replied, "but at dawn they were sent inland to the High Chief."

"Three or four hours start," exclaimed Stover, after he had rapidly translated for us. "Who are you?" he demanded of the boy.

"I am Alfonso Loyola Garcia, *señor.* I am a prisoner since two years. I ask you to take me away."

"Come on," said Stover; and in English, "This fellow may be lying. Search all the huts."

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We obeyed but the search was in vain. Already we saw women standing upon the elevation beyond the camp, spying upon our actions. If we tarried here we might be captured very shortly.

"Do you know where this High Chief lives?" demanded Stover of the Spanish youth.

"*Si, señor.* Five days march in the interior."

"We shall need horses and they are here for the taking," declared our leader. "Every man take an extra rifle and let us load ourselves with all the ammunition. You shall guide us, boy."

"There are only five of you," replied the youth. "They will kill you and me with you. Perhaps I should remain with the Indians."

Stover grasped him by the collar and shook him violently.

"You go with us," he said angrily, "and you carry two guns. You can ride, of course."

"*Si, si,*" he said meekly.

We were already loading ourselves with weapons and ammunition, and soon we moved on to the corral. It required five or six minutes to adjust the curious wooden saddles to the backs of five sorry nags, and in this the Spanish youth was of great assistance. Finally we were all mounted, each man with two rifles and various cartridge boxes, and we urged our horses forward.

By this time the ridge was black with women who screamed what sounded like imprecations, and on a further ridge we discerned a fire around which stood several women with blankets that they alternately stretched over the flame and removed. In methodical puffs the smoke rose.

"Those will be signals," said Church. "If any of the warriors are within sight, they will soon be upon our trail."

Stover laughed vexedly. "Can't be helped," he replied. "We have come through so far. Whither do we go, *muchacho?*"

The youth pointed to the distant hills.

"See, where there is a gap?" he asked. "We go always in that direction."

CHAPTER VI

BULLETS AND BOLAS

HAVING no spurs, we could not force our horses to gallop—which was as well, perhaps, since neither Rankin nor myself were horsemen of much experience. And it was not long before the crude saddles began to chafe us. Fortunate was it for us that the natives had not troubled to remove the reins from the lower jaws of the beasts. It was typical of the Patagonians, as we afterwards learned, to do nothing which could be avoided.

Nor did they take any thought for the morrow. They never laid in food supplies and only went hunting when every vestige of meat had been consumed. Laziest of mortals, cowardly except en masse, dirty, stupid, mentally degenerate—yet they were physically the finest specimens of mankind on the globe, and valiant warriors when in fighting mood, as our unfortunate friends had discovered.

Young Garcia claimed to be a Chilean. He had been a member of the crew of a barkentine bound from Valparaiso to Buenos Aires, and had come ashore with a party to get fresh water. He had wandered a few hundred yards from the other sailors, and a huge native sprang up behind him and dragged him down in the long grass.

The savage had forced him to crawl into a ravine where a dozen Indians waited with their horses. When the sailors had gone back to the ship, after a perfunctory search, the Indians had forced him to mount behind one of them and had taken him to their village. Since then he had been kicked and buffeted, made to do menial tasks, and otherwise scurvily treated.

He stated that the segment of the tribe whose camp we had raided owed fealty to a High Chief who resided in an adobe village built years ago by Spaniards who had settled there but who had been massacred. As game was far from abundant upon this semi-desert, the tribe was forced to split up into little clans which wan-

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dered all over the country. The clans were supposed to send to the high chief a certain amount of tribute in the form of skins and dried meat but were usually most remiss in so doing.

Recently, however, the High Chief had sent out word that he would give two horses for each able bodied white man captured by his followers, and this had inspired the savages to lay traps for seamen from passing ships. As Garcia was a half-grown youth they had not troubled to send him into the interior. He said he had been two years among them, and this we readily believed. His skin was as dark as theirs and he was dressed only in a filthy guanaco skin.

"Did they harm the white lady?" demanded Stover.

"No. She was so beautiful that the chief was going to take her to wife, but his three wives objected and he decided to send her with the men to the High Chief. His head wife told him that he would be sure to get a dozen horses for her.

"A good way to dispose of a rival," commented Rankin.

"Were our male friends wounded or abused?"

"Two or three of them had knife wounds, but not serious."

"How many men live in the village of the High Chief?" Stover demanded.

"Four or five hundred. There is good soil and water there and the Spanish women among the prisoners showed the Indians how to grow crops. The squaws raise vegetables and the men occasionally fare forth to make war on the chief's subjects who fail to send tribute."

After Stover had translated the gist of this talk, Rankin ventured an opinion.

"We are leaving the ocean behind us," he said. "Our only hope is to get on board a ship. In our rear are Indians who are certain to pursue us. Ahead, according to this boy, are other hordes of savages. Under the circumstances, any attempt to rescue the lady and our friends is doomed."

Stover asked the boy a question and nodded at the answer.

"There are twenty men escorting the prisoners," he told us. "If we can overtake this party we can effect a rescue. With our group reunited we shall make for the beach, fortify a camp, and hold out until a ship takes us off.

"Since we are traveling about half as fast as those we pursue," said Rankin with a sour grin, "when shall we overtake them?"

But Stover had a ready answer. "They do not expect pursuit and will camp at night. We shall ride without pause until we come upon them."

Rankin laughed loudly. "In a country without landmarks we shall lose our way when it grows dark."

"That," replied Stover, "is a chance we must take, my friend."

WE PLODDED on. The sun was rising higher in the heavens but there was no great warmth in it. We began to grow hungry but Stover would not consider a halt. Our nags, accustomed to carrying heavier men, stood the pace well and began to move faster of their own accord, an indication that we neared fresh water.

About noon, in fact, we came upon a small stream with trees and thick vegetation upon its banks. Stover consented to a ten minutes stop while we ate.

At this time, I must admit, I cherished no hope in my heart of eventually reaching the beach and being taken off by a ship. I doubted if any sailors from the Straits had even penetrated as far into Patagonia as we had come already. We were doing what men must do in such circumstances, making every human effort to save Madame de Lorme and her fellow prisoners, but we had no delusions of success. We could only resolve to slay as many of our enemies as possible before bowing to death inevitable.

Having been infatuated with the yellow haired woman, I had resented the rivalry of Enoch Stover, but now I was forced to admire his courage and resourcefulness. He questioned the boy regarding the knowledge possessed by the natives re-

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garding firearms and received some disquieting information. While our particular enemies did not own guns nor had any skill with bow and arrow, there were other clans which had a few antiquated flintlocks and percussion muskets, and some tribes used arrows as well as bolas in war and hunting. The High Chief not only had a fine rifle but knew how to use it.

At this news Rankin gave forth a mocking chuckle. Stover merely shrugged and ordered us again to our torture-saddles. We mounted wearily, but had ridden less than a quarter-mile when Abel Church raised a shout.

"We're in for it! They're coming."

A mile behind us a horseman was outlined against a ridge, and even as we gazed a dozen more came into view.

"Back to the stream," commanded Stover. "Flat on the grass, men, and give them a bellyful!"

The idea was good. A man who is prone offers no target for a bolas.

We hastened to the rivulet, hobbled our horses by looping the reins to front and back leg, and flattened out on the edge of the six-foot bank which was by way of being a natural entrenchment.

Galloping across the plain was the band of fifty horsemen that had passed us on our way to the village. Smoke signals, no doubt, had brought them back. They must have started a couple of hours behind us but they had traveled fast and brought us to bay.

"Can you fire a gun?" demanded Stover of the Chilean.

He nodded. "But I am not a good shot," he confessed.

"Then hold your fire until they come close." He turned to the rest of us, his voice vibrant. "Men, their trick is to draw a volley and rush in while we reload. Don't fire until they are near enough so that you cannot miss your man. If they then come on, give them your second shot."

The horsemen came swiftly ahead, but at the distance of a few hundred yards they came to a full stop and began to move parallel to us. We thought they intended to cross the stream and flank us, but they were not intelligent enough for that. Nor did they have the adroitness to divide forces and attack us front and rear. Instead, half a dozen of the leaders dismounted and held a conference.

"Remember," Stover called, "we can't waste a bullet. Let them come close enough to be certain targets."

We lay and waited and none of us spoke again. For my own part I felt a great emptiness inside me. It was my first taste of battle and I could not forget that the odds were ten to one. I was terrified, and I confess it, but not for an instant did I think of yielding. They say that even a coward, when he knows that surrender means death or hideous captivity, manages to fight well enough—and I prayed to God that we all might retain that courage of cowardice.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

Kidneys Must Remove Excess Acids

Help 15 Miles of Kidney Tubes Flush Out Poisonous Waste

If you have an excess of acid waste in your blood, your 15 miles of kidney tubes may be over-worked. These tiny filters and tubes are working day and night to help Nature rid your system of poisonous waste.

When functional kidney disorder permits poisonous matter to remain in the blood, you won't feel well. This may cause nagging backache, rheumatic pains, leg pains, loss of pep and energy, getting up nights, swelling, puffiness under the eyes, headaches and dizziness.

If you have trouble with frequent or scanty passages with smarting and burning, there may be something wrong with your kidneys or bladder.

Kidneys may need help the same as bowels, so ask your druggist for Doan's Pills, used successfully by millions for over 40 years. They give happy relief and will help the 15 miles of kidney tubes flush out poisonous waste from your blood. Get Doan's Pills.

(ADV.)

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In the flare of torches the giant Duk-Duk swirled

The Coughing Mountain

By DONALD BARR CHIDSEY

Author of "All Good Embezzlers," "Elephants To Ride Upon," etc.

Lady, for excitement New Guinea is recommended. Here the drums beat and the Duk-Duk dances at midnight; here you cannot even be sure of the sky overhead or the ground beneath your feet. A complete novelet

I

LIGGETT was high in the southeast grove when he saw the schooner come around the point and drop anchor about half way between the house and the clouds of steam that wreathed Nam-Nam. She was a gaunt and shabby craft, her decks dirty, her standing rigging slack; but such is the charm of distance and a tropical background that to Harry Liggett she first seemed not only romantic but downright natty.

The shore was not good hereabouts and most coasting vessels stood far out, so that Liggett did not glimpse them. The copra schooner, which appeared every fifth or sixth week with mail and supplies, had departed only a few days ago.

This was probably Ashley, Liggett reflected. He remembered Ashley's letter, recently received from Sydney.

Dear Mr. Liggett:

I saw your advertisement in the Pacific Islands Monthly for an investing partner for your plantation in Madang,

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T.N.G., and am interested. I go to Salamaua soon—I shall perhaps be there before you receive this—and I'll try to charter a boat to take me to your place, which I should like very much to inspect.

Very truly,
T. S. Ashley.

He recognized the vessel as he got down near the shore. The *Idriess,* Nielson's trader, from Rabaul. She was always available for charter. So it probably *was* Ashley.

A dinghy had come ashore, in it a red-haired giant, a black boy at the oars, and seated in the stern a very small young woman. The giant scrambled out, paying no attention to the others. Liggett nodded with no joviality.

"Hello, Fergusson. I see you're still at large."

Simon Fergusson was always in some sort of trouble and everybody who knew him expected him to end in jail or on the gallows. As a barroom bully he had a fondness for using bottles instead of his fists. As a trader he never took a straight course when a crooked one was open. He was a good sailor and navigator, and handy with any kind of Diesel engine, but he was a bad man to deal with.

Once he had been a recruiter, but he lost his license because of mistreatment of the indentured men—and women. The missionaries, Catholic and Protestant alike, always had their knives out for him. Once in Port Moresby they caused his arrest on a charge of selling liquor to natives, but he wriggled out of it, though he never went back to Port Moresby or anywhere else in Papua.

Indeed Red Fergusson's field of operations was singularly small for a man of his profession. Something had happened in Noumea one night, in a little cafe off the Place des Cocotiers, as a result of which he was no longer permitted to land in any French colony. Something had happened one night in Samarang, and afterward officials unofficially informed Fergusson to get out of the Dutch East Indies and stay out.

The giant grinned unpleasantly. "Think I'll stretch my legs." He started for the natives' enclosure. "Always wondered what kind of dump you had here."

"You keep away from those Marys now!"

"Don't worry. I wasn't born yesterday."

"And listen: Have you got a passenger named T. S. Ashley?"

The redhead without turning jerked his thumb toward the girl-like figure in the stern of the dinghy.

"That's T. S. Ashley. But there's no sense trying to get anywhere with her, Liggett. Coldest proposition you ever met."

LIGGETT remembered her then; at least, he recognized her from her pictures, for the girl herself he had never seen. Theresa Seldon Ashley, "Terry" Ashley to thousands, was twenty and looked sixteen. So diminutive that you would not suppose her capable of lasting an entire set, she had been spectacularly on her way toward the Commonwealth women's singles championship—when she dropped tennis in favor of big-game hunting.

She had bagged a tiger in Johore; another tiger, two gaurs and an elephant in the jungles of Lao; and she had been on the eve of departure for Africa to try for a lion—when she'd suddenly quit *that* sport to take up flying. Her instructors raved about her. Had they been Americans they would have dubbed her a natural. Also she was rich. She ordered planes as a scholar might order books.

Spending most of her waking hours in the air, she had achieved her "B" license in breathlessly short time. She had lowered the Sydney-Singapore record; then the Sydney-Auckland record; and recently, as Liggett had learned from the men on the mail schooner, the Sydney-Rabaul record.

When she jumped out of the dinghy there was nothing masculine about her appearance or manner. She looked dainty as a flower.

"Are you Mr. Liggett? I wrote you."

"Yes," said Liggett. He had a cool, slow way of talking. "Isn't your—uh—companion coming ashore?"

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"Companion? I don't have one. I'm the only passenger."

Liggett was not easily shocked, but at this his eyebrows slid up.

"The only woman! With a mate like Red Fergusson!"

"I made him behave," she answered carelessly.

"And Captain Neilson? Was he sober at any time?"

"Not for an hour. But he's a pleasant old souse. Turned his cabin over to me. And then there were two other white men, the second mate and the supercargo. They're friends of Fergusson's."

"That's an excellent recommendation. You really ought to stick to stunt flying. Safer, I'd say."

"Oh, nonsense! This isn't the nineteenth century!"

"Men haven't changed much."

"Well, women have! Anyway," she added tartly, "I didn't come to discuss the decay of chaperonage. I came to look over your plantation. If I like it, I might invest in it and stay here."

The latter part of this last statement Liggett found disconcerting. He swallowed. He pointed out apologetically that he was the only white person in a radius of fifty-odd miles.

"Besides," he went on, "it's pretty slow here. Just work, work, work. You've probably got the idea that plantation life is exciting, but it isn't."

She looked at him; and her eyes shone with amusement.

"You're not much of a salesman, Mr. Liggett. I'd always heard that all Americans were good salesmen. You *are* an American, aren't you? You certainly talk like one."

"Yes, I'm an American. Well . . ." Troubled, he glanced toward the enclosure. He could just see the tops of the huts above the hump of land between where he stood and the mouth of the river. He was worried about Fergusson. "Shall we have some tea? We can look over the plantation tomorrow."

"Why tomorrow? Why not right now? What kind of American are you?" She spread her feet, looking down at her small straight legs. "You see, I even wore jodhpurs in anticipation."

As though her glance had stimulated it, the earth jumped. There was no breeze, but the leaves of the hibiscus hedge near them shuddered violently. Ripples slipped away from each pile of the dock, agitating a lagoon which until then had been smooth as tin.

"What in the world was that?"

Liggett explained, "A tremor. We have them now and then."

She glanced out past the *Idriess* toward stumpy steam-shrouded Nam-Nam. It was no mountain, only a truncated hill which guarded one end of the bay, and it looked harmless.

"Is that really a volcano? I've heard about it, of course."

"Yes, it's a volcano. That's one reason why I got this place so cheap, and why I'm offering a partnership so cheap—that and the remoteness of the place, which makes transportation charges high. But Nam-Nam doesn't really amount to much. I've climbed it and looked down into the crater. Just a sort of stagnant lake. Now and then a big slow bubble forms and busts and steam comes out of it. They haven't had a real eruption for years."

"For a man who leads such a dull life, Mr. Liggett, you talk very lightly of earthquakes and volcanos."

"Shall we go up to the house?"

WHILE horses were being saddled Terry Ashley strolled up and down the veranda studying the garden. "I thought you said there were no white women here? You certainly didn't get any natives to do all that?"

"I did it myself," Liggett confessed. "It's a bad policy to let the boys see you do any manual work, but you just have to have some sort of personal hobby. Of course I'm not able to keep it up the way it should be. I'm usually too tired."

They were about to mount—he had given her Jackpot, keeping jumpy Ger-

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aldine for himself—when they heard screams from the direction of the compound.

"Excuse me," cried Liggett, and mounted and was off.

Even before he reached the center of the enclosure and dismounted, he saw what had happened.

Fergusson stood surrounded by native women and a few cook boys; the rest of the men were out in the fields. The woman directly in front of Fergusson waved sweaty arms, more angry than scared, and there was blood coming from her nose. Obviously the mate of the *Idriess* had made her a characteristic suggestion and had resented her refusal. As Liggett rode up an excited cook boy—the woman with the bleeding nose was his wife—grabbed Fergusson's arm. Fergusson swung upon him with a snarl, punched him twice.

"Cut it out!"

Liggett strode into their midst, both arms raised. These natives were from a section of the Finisterre Mountains until recently unvisited by the boldest recruiters, and they were uncertain of temper. Ordinarily they were quiet enough, and obedient, though sulky; but after all they were a short generation removed from centuries of cannibalism, and their fathers had esteemed the hunting of human heads a delightful pastime. You never knew how people like that might act.

"Damn you, Fergusson! You know better than to do that!"

"No dirty kanaka's going to grab my arm!"

"Now when the government agent makes his regular visit," Liggett pointed out bitterly, "this boy will tell him you assaulted him when he was trying to protect his wife. And the rest of them will back him up. Won't you ever learn to let these people alone?"

"The hell with the government agent!"

"The hell with him nothing! If I don't make a report before he interviews these people I'll get into all sorts of trouble. This isn't the old days any more!"

Fergusson's small blue eyes flamed. He'd had another little scrape with a native just before leaving Salamaua. That might have blown over by the time he returned, and then again it might not. With his reputation and record he simply couldn't afford another complaint.

"Now see here, Liggett! You keep your bloody mouth shut about this or you'll put me in a bad spot!"

"You should have thought of that before."

"Why, you bloody—"

A great red hairy hand closed upon the front of Liggett's shirt. Liggett stepped back smartly, and two buttons popped. He swung a short hard right. There was a crunching sound, and the sailor's head snapped back. He roared like a wounded bull and came charging in. Liggett sidestepped, hooked a left to the belly, sent a straight right to the jaw. Fergusson stopped. He wavered. He fell to hands and knees.

He rose slowly, snicking out a sheath knife. The blade was about five inches long, very bright and sharp. He held it point forward like a sword, and low. He started toward Liggett.

"Drop that!"

The sailor blinked, looking up in astonishment. Terry Ashley had ridden into the enclosure unnoticed. She faced Fergusson at a distance of only about fifteen feet, and in her hand was a small pearl-handled automatic pistol.

"This thing's no toy, Fergusson. You know that." She smiled fleetingly at Liggett. "I had occasion to shoot it off very close to him one night when he tried to take advantage of my maidenly innocence," she explained. "So drop the knife, Fergusson."

Fergusson did not drop the knife, but he sheathed it. He muttered something no gentleman would have muttered, and with a final poisonous glance at Liggett he made off toward the dock.

Liggett said, "Thanks." He quieted the natives in rapid pidgin, promising to back their complaint to the government agent, promising also that Simon Fergusson would

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not be permitted in the enclosure again. Then he mounted.

"Good idea, carrying a pistol. We'll go back to the house before we start out to look things over, and I'll get my own. From what I know of Fergusson he's not likely to take this lying down."

II

THERE was another earth tremor, slight but unmistakable and rather sickening, as they started away; but Liggett did not permit it to interrupt his description of the plantation. He was all business now. He talked persistently though not boastfully, not urging her to buy, only explaining, detailing, describing. He was thorough, and absolutely honest. It would mean a great deal to him to get a partner with capital, but he wasn't going to try any high-powered salesmanship. He told about the bad as he told about the good.

He had put every penny he owned into this plantation and had worked it unremittingly for two years, but the place was far away, the price of copra was ruinously low, and unless he had financial assistance —denied him by the usual sources because no banker would take a chance on an establishment so near Nam-Nam—he would be forced to go under.

He told her what he needed, and why. A white assistant, a foreman; for one man alone was not enough to handle eighty-six natives and conduct the business end of the plantation besides. A kiln, so that he could dry his copra more evenly and get a better price for it. Perhaps later a small schooner or ketch, so that he could transport his own product to Madang, where the B. P. ship could pick it up, thus saving excessive transportation charges.

He showed her the smoke sheds, the bagging sheds, the corrugated iron storehouse. He showed her the huts, of bamboo and nipa.

"The natives built these themselves?"

"Yes, after I'd showed them how and given them the materials. I could have done the whole job in less time myself, but I'd have lost so much face if they saw me working that I'd never be able to handle them afterward."

"I have yet to meet anybody who has a good word for the natives."

"You're not likely to, unless he's a missionary or a liar."

"They *are* a surly lot."

"They're surly," agreed Liggett, "and they're ignorant and stupid and ungrateful and lazy and treacherous and incompetent. The worst ones are from the coast villages, where the missionaries have had a crack at them. These boys I have aren't wonders, but at least they were recruited back in the hills."

He had thrown a light raincoat over her shoulders and another over his own. It rained repeatedly—rained so hard sometimes that they could scarcely see more than a few yards ahead and had to shout to make themselves heard.

"When is the rainy season here?"

"All year 'round. We have an average annual fall of one hundred and forty-something inches, one of the highest in the world. Call it twelve feet and you get a better idea. When the river overflows its banks, as it does every now and then, crocodiles are washed right up into my backyard. I sit at a kitchen window and shoot 'em. You have to get them through the eye."

He showed her the nursery.

"The roundest nuts, laid down four or five months in advance. I put them on their sides, about eighteen inches apart, with the tops just level with the ground."

Another shower roared down upon them. Liggett paid no attention to it except to raise his voice again.

"I'm doing more with the nursery than I'd originally planned. These trees now are too old. I'm not averaging more than thirty nuts to the tree a year."

"Isn't that good?"

"I hope to double it. But taking over a broken-down plantation isn't like taking over a broken-down house, where you can work hard for a little while and make it

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into something good. This takes years."

He pointed again to the nursery.

"About the time the second leaf's forming I'll plant them out. That stuff you see there is cow-peas, to keep the sun off. I feed the peas themselves to the boys."

"It must be quite a problem, feeding all those natives."

"It is. Fortunately there's plenty of *sak-sak*, so I don't often have to deal out rice, which is expensive. I keep a hunt boy busy and two fish boys. They have to report every night and account for every cartridge and stick of dynamite."

"You keep dynamite here?"

"Right in the house, in a kitchen closet. I'm going to put it in a separate shed as soon as I can afford to build one, but I've got to keep it somewhere in the meanwhile, somewhere where the boys can't get at it. And of course I've got to have plenty. You don't think I could get enough fish in a day with hook and line, do you?"

"But—well, isn't it dangerous?"

"Not 'specially. We're coming to the first grove now. It's all square lined, but I'm going to burn it over soon and put out the nuts from the nursery, and then I'll line it hexagonally. You can see where— Excuse me a second. Don't move."

Expertly, with no expression, he shot the head off a snake.

"Death adder. They come right into the house some nights."

HE TALKED on, grimly, exactly, telling about the struggle against *kunai* grass, erosion, rhinoceros beetles, snout beetles, spathe moths, scissors beetles, thread-blight, leaf-spot. He tried to be cold and businesslike; but watching him sideways she was filled with admiration of this man who protested that he led a dull life.

In him she perceived a sort of courage new in her experience. She had flown across thousands of miles of ocean, she had kept her head and brought down a charging *gaur* so that it sprawled within a few yards of her feet; but never in those moments had she been obliged to call upon such stamina as this man exercised in every waking hour.

Here in a poisonous pestiferous land of scorching heat and terrific rains he toiled without rest and without thanks. He held back the throttling greedy-fingered jungle; by sheer power of will he controlled fourscore superstitious savages; he ate and slept in a house stocked with explosives, virtually in the shadow of a volcano, while the very earth beneath him shivered and shook. Yet the worst of all the things he had to contend with he had not even mentioned.

"You must get horribly lonesome here?"

"I do." He shouted at a native who was unoccupied: "Where you stoppum work 'long you? Where stoppum boy ee look-outum bingatang? Callum name belong task! You like 'um me fassum tobac 'long you?"

The boy went instantly to work, and Leggitt started a discourse on the disadvantages of the sort of green manuring recommended by the territorial government.

He was still talking about this when they got back. He invited her to stop for tea, but she shook her head. Under the raincoat he'd provided her body was soaked with perspiration, and she wanted to change.

He looked out toward the *Idriess*.

"I don't like the idea of you going back there. If those other two are friends of Fergusson, and Neilson's on a binge—"

"Oh, I'm all right." She stepped into the dinghy. "The others are too busy with their own troubles to pay any heed to me. They've been quarreling with the captain. They keep getting him drunk and trying to get him to agree to something, and when he won't they're furious. I don't know just what it is—something about feathers."

"Feathers, eh?"

"It seems, as far as I can make out, that Fergusson had some trouble just before we left Salamaua and he's afraid to go back right away. He wants to do some-

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thing else first, but I don't know just what it is. They've been trying to keep me from hearing anything. But I'll be all right. Don't worry about me."

"At least come back and have dinner with me."

"All right. I'll do that."

She waved, and the native pulled at the oars. Liggett watched them for a while; then went back up through the garden, across the veranda, and into the house. The house boy, who should have been preparing dinner, was not in sight. However, the place was not empty. Simon Fergusson sat in a chair tilted against the wall, facing Liggett, and across his lap was a shotgun. The muzzles were pointed at Liggett.

"Come right in. I want to have a little talk with you."

LIGGETT looked disgusted. He crossed to the kitchen door, bawled for the house boy, then went back to a chair opposite Fergusson, dropped into it, lighted a cigarette.

"Stop being stupid. That's one of my own shotguns, which the hunt boy just brought back. But he didn't bring back any shells. I know that, because I only allotted him eight this afternoon and while I was riding around the plantation I heard him bang away that many times in the jungle."

Fergusson grinned. He put the shotgun aside.

"I was only trying to rib you, Liggett."

"Yes? I see you've been helping yourself to my whisky."

"Well, I thought you wouldn't mind."

"You were wrong there. Anyway what's on your chest? What are you here for? What's this business about feathers?"

The light blue eyes grew hard. "Feathers? So that gal's been listening to things, eh?"

"Never mind her. What do you want?"

"See here, Liggett, you ain't really going to make out that report about that nigger, are you?"

"I certainly am. I've got to."

"Now listen: Maybe if I let you in on something good—"

"Feathers?"

"Yes, feathers. As a matter of fact, that's what Noyes and Ende and me have been talking about. If we can persuade old Neilson to stay here a little while, and if you'll lend us some guns and ammunition and maybe some quinine and so-forth, and let us use some of your boys for carriers, we could go back into the rain forest and inside of a week we could bring down enough birds of paradise to fill the hold of the *Idriess*. Around your place here, from what I've heard, they're thick as flies!"

Liggett nodded.

"You seem to forget that there's a territorial law against exportation of any birds of paradise or their feathers."

"Ah, laws! That's what old Neilson worries about! Listen, I tell you those feathers are coming into fashion again and they're fetching big prices because there's so few places where they can be got.

"Now I don't happen to want to go back to Salamaua or Rabaul right now, for reasons of my own, but if we was to get the *Idriess* full of feathers we could make for a certain Jap trader I know in the Marians, and he's willing to pay cash and no questions asked. We couldn't clear for there, of course, but we could land these things without showing any papers. This Jap can arrange that."

He took another drink. "Don't you see? There's thousands of pounds in it, in just one trip! Just for lending us some supplies for a little while and then keeping your face shut after that, you could make enough to buy yourself a new kiln and get yourself a foreman here and everything else you need. Don't you see that, Liggett?"

"I see this: That I'm sick of having you around here drinking my liquor. So get out."

"Now see here—"

"Or do you want me to throw you out?"

Simon Fergusson stood with feet spread wide, fists doubled, a large man and un-

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accustomed to defiance of this nature. He was blinking, scowling. Otherwise he did not move.

"All right," said Liggett.

He took off his raincoat. He tightened his belt.

Ten minutes later, when Terry Ashley returned in the dinghy, she was greeted by a staid proprietor who supported a large lurching figure.

"Mr. Fergusson is not staying for dinner," Liggett explained.

Fergusson staggered past her and into the boat. He kept his head turned but she noticed that there were red spots on his shirt and that the seat of his trousers was thick with mud.

Liggett was offering his hand.

"Come right in. I wish I could offer you a cocktail, but the best I can do is cooking sherry."

"I think that would be lovely."

BEFORE and during dinner he was in everything the host, but when the house boy had cleared away the last plate Liggett came back to business. He brought out his books. He quoted figures. He showed her graphs, yield charts, price lists, comparison tables of transportation costs. She was tired and not much interested in all this, but he persisted. Obviously this plantation fascinated its owner, who seldom got such a chance to talk about it.

"That house boy seemed angry about something," she said once.

Liggett frowned.

"He gets looking that way when he's worried. Right now it's those tremors. I'm worried about them too."

"You were very off-hand about them this afternoon."

"Oh, it isn't the tremors themselves! It's their effect on the boys. They believe in all sorts of fantastic gods, and everything has a significance in sorcery. They may take one thing as a bad sign, another thing as a good sign, for no clear reason. They're nervous critters and haven't got used to the seacoast yet."

"They seem to be beating their drums down there hard enough right now. Does that mean they're up to mischief?"

The thudding, monotonous, tuneless beat of hand drums and slit gongs, and the occasional deep-throated *tham* of a great *garamut,* were insistent in the night air.

Liggett shook his head.

"No. I don't mind as long as I hear that noise. They always thump away like that for an hour or two every night. If it stopped, then I'd begin to get really worried."

"What do you think they might do?"

"No telling. They're absolutely unpredictable. But what seems most likely is that they might fly into a panic and make a dash for the hills. I've got the rice locked up, but they might go even without that. There's plenty of *sak-sak* growing wild."

"Would they come back?"

"Probably not. You see, they don't have the slightest sense of duty or responsibility. They're indentured to me for three years, but I doubt whether any of them really knows what that means. The recruiters are supposed to approach them individually, but actually they go to the chief and give him a lot of tobacco, and the chief simply turns over a batch of his people.

"When the recruiter gets them down to the coast each one makes his mark to testify that he's doing this of his own free will. But naturally he doesn't really know what's going on. They're the worst laborers in the world, but they're the only kind the government will allow us to have."

He jerked his head toward the source of the weird music.

"Let a medicine man get them steamed up and they'd forget all about making those marks in the presence of a magistrate—if they haven't already forgotten. If they run away, of course the government's obligated to get them back for me, but if you'd ever seen the Finisterre Range you'd know how much chance there

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was of that! I could chase them myself, but if I couldn't catch them, or if I caught them but couldn't induce them to return, it would take me months to get another batch—and in the meanwhile the *kunai* would spread, and maybe the beetles too."

"Is it such wild country back there?"

"The wildest in the world. Central Africa's a formal garden compared with it. There are hundreds of square miles where no white man has ever been. There's practically no flat ground, and there are dizzy cliffs and peaks eight and nine thousand feet high. You never see the natives themselves. You seldom see anything very much. The lianas and rattans make a jungle roof so thick that the sunlight can't ever get through. Even at noon it's midnight."

He talked a good deal about New Guinea. She perceived that he was no fool. He knew what he faced. He knew he was killing himself by overwork and that unless he could raise some capital immediately he would be wiped out; but he did not tell lies about the plantation.

When he saw her trying to stifle a yawn he rose hastily.

"I'm sorry! Here you're tired, and I talk your ear off!"

He glanced out across the bay to where a murky cloud-smeared moon tried to spread light upon the water, and as he did so there was another of those earth tremors. It was a curious feeling, and an unpleasant one. The earth seemed to drop a very short distance, jerkily, like an elevator with a slippy cable. It was not the extent of this drop which terrified, but the fact that it was a movement of humanity's very base, a hint of immense uncertainties in what mankind had for centuries been accustomed to think of as immovable, incorruptible. In this remote land, Terry Ashley reflected, you couldn't even be sure of the sky over your head or the ground beneath your feet.

She looked again at the man who, living in this place, remained undefeated. His head was cocked, his eyes blank. For a moment she was puzzled. Then with a start of alarm she realized what it was he was listening to.

The drums, the slit gongs, the *garamut* had ceased, and no sound came from the village. Liggett was listening to the silence.

"I'd better go there," he muttered.

III

TORCHES spitting and sizzling with pitch illuminated the edge of the river. The entire population was out, fifty-five men, thirty-one women, children uncounted. The light glistened on their black backs and breasts. Only the men, and not many of them, ventured to approach the dancing figure.

Terry Ashley when she first saw it gave a little gasp. For a wild instant she wondered whether she really was looking at some sort of monster.

It was immensely tall and garbed from shoulders to ankles in a cascading series of skirts or petticoats made of *draecena* leaves strung together. This was yellowish-brown. Above it was a huge mask, the mask of a cruel, hideous bird, painted in flaring whorls of green, red, yellow, purple, blue. Surmounting this was a black church-steeple hat fully five feet tall. As the figure hopped first on one foot, then on the other, this hat teetered and the petticoats rose and fell with a curious hissing sound. Shrill cries of threat, somewhat like the cries of a cassowary, came out of the great hooked beak.

"He's got a Duk-Duk outfit," Liggett cried.

The Duk-Duks are a secret criminal society of natives of New Britain, an island off the eastern end of New Guinea. Their *tubuans*, garbed like this, land from canoes to dance and terrify non-members. Frankly murderous, they have been suppressed by the territorial government, but it is believed that they still carry on some of their practices, and the mere mention of them even today strikes terror to the natives of those parts.

Now Liggett's blacks presumably had never heard of the Duk-Duks, the Ingiets

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or any of the other organized criminal bands—they had probably never even heard of New Britain—but the costume was no less effective for this reason. It had been designed for frightfulness, and frightfulness it achieved. In a museum of Melanesian culture it would have been an interesting exhibit. In the native compound on Liggett's plantation it was a thing packed with all sorts of possibilities for mischief.

The Duk-Duk *tubuans* traditionally landed from boats. Yes, there was a boat here, the dinghy from the *Idriess,* a vague disappearing shadow slipping out of the mouth of the river and into the bay. But Liggett had seen it. He pushed through the crowd.

"Take that thing off, you fool! Do you want to start a riot?"

The figure took a backward step. Its cries ceased, and from the beak came a mumble meant only for Liggett's ears.

"Now tike your time. You come any closer and you'll get in trouble. I've got a gun under here."

Liggett faced the natives.

"Me no like. Gouria 'long whatname? Ee got frait? Bell belong me ee 'hot. Me cross too much 'long you. Ear belong you ee fas long harum talk?"

He was giving them hell in pidgin. He waved his arms. He asked if they were children to be impressed by such a silly exhibition. This *tubuan* was no more than a man, a white man, and he'd prove as much. He turned.

"S' help me, if you tike another step I'll shoot!"

Liggett, unbelieving, walked on.

There was a rustle of petticoats and out of the costume emerged a hand which held a pistol with a cannon-like barrel. It looked like an eighteenth century horse pistol.

Liggett dropped flat, reaching for his own revolver.

THERE was a sharp click, a *fwee-ee-ee* sound; light flared; light ascended, rocketing, *wheeing* through the black of the night; and the man in the Duk-Duk outfit really began to dance—not slowly, not for effect, but in pain and fright. Possibly because he did not want to expose an arm merely human, he had held the apparatus too close to his body; and the *draecena* leaves, utterly dry, might as well have been that many strips of celluloid.

The man screamed. He whirled around three or four times, and stumbled this way and that, while flames leapt gleefully up his body. Whether from fright or because his first involuntary jump of pain had displaced the mask, he was obviously blind. He didn't know where he was going. In another half-minute he would have been burned to a crisp.

Liggett sprang to his feet and kicked the man. He kicked him very hard, and the kick sent him stumbling to the edge of the river, where he tripped on a hummock and sprawled full length. There was a loud hissing, and smoke rose, together with a sharp unpleasant odor.

By that time Liggett was busy elsewhere.

The natives at sight of that rocket had broken away like one man. Now they were everywhere, in scampering panicky groups, yelling and pushing, crowding among their huts. They did not try to go into the huts. They sought only to pass among them, for with their homing instincts they could only think to run toward the hills.

Liggett saw this, or sensed it, and so, amazingly, did Terry Ashley, who had reached the enclosure just behind him. They worked at a little distance from each other, yet they worked together. The girl in that instant realized that dealing with natives in New Guinea was not essentially different from dealing with cattle.

"The storehouse," Liggett yelled.

It was a stampede and they were cowboys; and if they did not keep their heads, or even perhaps if they did, they might be trampled to death. They kicked with feet and knees, butted with elbows and shoulders. They yelled, waved their

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arms. What they actually called made no difference, for mere words were not distinguished by those fright-maddened Melanesians; but the manner in which they behaved did the trick.

Fortunately the door of the storehouse, the largest and strongest building on the plantation, stood open. The place was empty, since Liggett had recently sent all his copra to Madang. It consisted of corrugated iron on a heavy timber framework, and the floor was concrete. There were no windows. The copra, Terry Ashley thought in those wild moments when they were handling the panic, was better housed than the owner of the plantation himself.

Mob psychology held. A few boys, kicked and pushed by Liggett, scurried into the storehouse; and after that it was easy, for the others followed without thought. Liggett locked the big double doors. Panting, he looked at the girl. She seemed such a slip of a thing to have thought and acted so swiftly and with such courage.

"Thanks again. You're really a lot of help around here."

"Nice quiet place," she panted. "Nothing ever happens."

He did not answer this but returned to the edge of the river. The natives, he knew, though filled with fear, would be safe enough in the storehouse. They would not break out, for they did not have the intelligence to use their strength collectively. They wouldn't be very comfortable; but by morning they'd be at least quiet.

The man with the Duk-Duk costume was no longer something out of a nightmare. The steeple hat had fallen, carrying with it the mask, and he stood ankle-deep in mud, knee-deep in water, with the smoking remnants of the *draecena* clinging patchily to his long and thin frame.

Liggett picked up the instrument the man had dropped. It was a Very pistol, made for firing signal flares.

"Better come out of there before some croc' takes a nip at your legs," Liggett advised.

THE man, it appeared, was Ende, Bob Ende, supercargo of the *Idriess*, tall, sandy, seedy, vinegarish, Australian. He spoke like a Cockney. His eyes were gray and resentful. He had a grudge against the world. He whined continually. Even when Liggett had taken him to the house, had stripped him and was treating his burns, he whimpered and seemed to consider himself a wronged man. He even complained that Liggett was too brusque in putting on the ointment.

"Try keeping your mouth shut," Liggett suggested. "What I ought to be doing is putting marks on your carcass, not trying to take them off!"

"I was only 'aving a bit of fun. Cawn't you tike a joke?"

"Not that kind. All right, get dressed again and get out of here. Whistle for the dinghy and when it comes stand by." He picked up the Very pistol. "As for this, I'll put it with my other guns for the present." He unlocked a closet in which all his firearms were kept. "If Captain Neilson feels he really needs it again, tell him to come ashore personally and I'll hand it over to him. All right—now beat it!"

Terry Ashley came in a moment later.

"Looks like a hospital. You're not a doctor too, are you?"

"No, but I'm sort of the *tul-tul* around here. Took a special course in the hospital at Rapindik. Good thing I did, too."

He was tired and cross. People from civilization, he pointed out, seemed to think that the Melanesian uncorrupted was one of nature's athletes, a strapping fellow unacquainted with disease. As a matter of fact, he went on, there isn't a sicklier race in the world.

Back in the interior a large part of the noble savages who weren't killed in tribal warfare either starved to death or else suffered all their lives from various diseases brought about by malnutrition. Even the cream of the crop, those taken

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away by recruiters, young men and their young wives, certified to be in good physical condition by the Territorial Public Health Department before being permitted to go to the plantations—even these, though better fed and cared for than at any time in their lives previously, were able to work only part of the time because of illnesses. The threat of pneumonia, which could carry away whole tribes, was a nightmare to every planter—though white people in New Guinea seldom suffered from it. Dysentery and tuberculosis were likely to break out at any time.

As much a part of his equipment for producing copra as his smoke sheds were Liggett's medicines, bandages and surgical instruments, and his experience and training in the treatment of malaria, ringworm, Japanese river fever, dengue, tropical ulcer, sycosis, dhobi itch, blackwater fever, prickly heat, yaws, beri-beri, snake bite and dozens of other ailments and injuries.

All this, however, he kept to himself. He was afraid (he was wrong here) that he had already bored her with talk about the hardships of plantation life. Besides, he was very tired.

"I still don't like the idea of you going on that boat with four white men and a couple of kanakas," he said as he escorted her down to the dock.

"Oh, I'm all right. I can handle myself."

"Well, if you should change your mind I can always put you up here at the house."

AFTER the boat had pulled away he stood staring out toward the reef and the cloud-draped blur of Nam-Nam. He was tired, yes, but not sleepy. For the benefit of his visitor he had maintained a pose of self-confidence; but in fact he was troubled in his mind. He did not know Red Fergusson well personally, but he had heard a great deal about the man, and from all he had heard Fergusson was not one to drop a money-making scheme at the first obstacle. Nor was he a man to forgive and forget a crack in the jaw. If he could control the *Idriess,* and had a bootleg market for them, he could unquestionably make a small fortune in bird of paradise feathers, provided he could get the necessary firearms and supplies.

The reason for the Duk-Duk act was clear. Fergusson had hoped to cause the natives to run away, confident that Liggett would go after them. Then Fergusson could break into the plantation house, steal guns, ammunition and supplies, and take to the bush for a three- or four-day slaughter of the world's most beautiful birds. What Liggett might do about this when he returned—assuming that he did return—would not worry Red Fergusson, who by that time would have plenty of money and the means of getting to another land.

Well, the Duk-Duk act had failed. But Fergusson had hit at Liggett's weakest spot—and he would hit again.

Liggett strolled away from the dock toward the compound. He had forgotten his flashlight, but this didn't matter. He knew every inch of the ground here anyway.

If was odd about the girl. Liggett couldn't help admiring her. She was not at all as he'd pictured her, forming his opinion from newspaper accounts of her exploits. She was no rich, spoiled seeker of sensation. She loved combat for its own sake, Liggett knew now, and could face danger with unvarying gaiety, whether or not there happened to be an audience present. She was not hysterical, only restless.

Wealthy, and without responsibilities or duties, she had not found life exciting enough; so she sought out excitement. Here at the plantation she had acted with notable bravery and presence of mind. On two occasions she had quite conceivably saved Liggett's life. When she covered Fergusson with that little automatic, and even more emphatically when she helped Liggett stem the rush of the natives, she had acted swiftly, coolly and without regard for the peril in which she placed herself.

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The huts stood silent and deserted. He went to the storehouse, careful to make no noise, and listened. There was a certain amount of mumbled conversation and a few women wailed intermittently, but there seemed no trace of panic. They would quiet down. Probably most of them were asleep in there already.

He went back to the house, and to bed. But not to sleep. While his body ached with fatigue his mind raced. Some time around midnight he rose, lighted a cigarette, and went out on the veranda.

Though no breeze blew and there was a curious stillness in the air, the mosquitoes weren't as bad as usual. He sat in a wicker chair tipped against the wall, his heels swinging idly while he looked across the bay.

The *Idriess* loomed a vague white, for the moon was at that moment behind clouds. Nam-Nam, for a shabby insignificant little volcano which had never behaved and never could be expected to behave in the grand tradition of Pelee, Aetna, or Vesuvius, was singularly impressive to behold. Though stumpy, it had dignity tonight. It seemed to disdain the earth, turning toward the clouds a look of understanding: for were not these the lurking places of lightning and thunder?

There was another earth tremor, and the veranda shook. Liggett frowned. He was definitely worried about those tremors. There had been more of them in the past twelve hours than were usual here in a month. He looked not so favorably at Nam-Nam. This was no time for it to be getting ideas.

Then the moon struggled through a rift in the clouds to shine for an instant upon the bay, lighting it weakly so that the water resembled lead-foil. Immediately the moon was covered again and darkness was resumed.

But Liggett had glimpsed something which caused him to forget all about volcanos. He sprang out of the chair, raced down to the shore, pushed out in the canoe his fishing boys left there every night.

Somewhere about half-way between the schooner and the little dock . . . Might be closer in, now.

IV

HE CAME upon her suddenly, almost running her down in the darkness. She was swimming with long fast strokes, but keeping her arms under water and kicking frog-fashion; she was careful not to make the slightest noise. When the canoe slid alongside of her head she gave a little gasp.

His hands under her armpits, he lifted her bodily out of the bay and desposited her in the bow of the canoe. She seemed no bigger than a cat. She wore pajamas.

"Is this some new form of thrill?" he asked coldly. "I thought you had better sense than to swim in a place teeming with sharks."

Unexpectedly she started to cry. It amazed Liggett more than anything else she could possibly have done.

"Don't—don't scold me," she whispered. Then she tried to smile. "I'm afraid I got a real scare this time."

"I'm sorry. What in the world's happened?"

"I couldn't use the *dinghy* because they'd hauled that up on deck and they would have heard me, and I simply couldn't stay on that boat a moment longer. You see—I have reason to believe that Captain Neilson was murdered a little while ago."

Dangling from Liggett's lips still was the cigarette he'd been smoking when first he saw the swimmer. He took this out of his mouth now, gazed at it thoughtfully for a moment, put it back into his mouth and inhaled very slowly, so that his face was reddened by the glow. Then he threw the thing overboard, and there was a silken hiss when it struck the water. He leaned toward the girl and spoke very quietly.

"Tell me about it."

Immediately upon returning to the schooner she had gone to her own little

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cabin and got into her bunk. Supercargo Ende of the nasal whine was with her in the dinghy and he left her to join Fergusson, Second Mate Noyes and Captain Neilson in the main cabin, through which she had to pass to reach her own cabin. The captain was drunk, almost insensible, and the others appeared to have been quarreling with him. Their faces were flushed, their fists clenched. She noticed in particular that one of Red Fergusson's eyes was closed and his mouth was badly puffed, but (Liggett smiled in the darkness when she said this) she did not know whether he had been injured there in the cabin or previously.

When she had passed through the main cabin their voices fell. They mumbled goodnights. For a long time after she had crawled into her bunk they continued to talk in low voices. Then they seemed to forget her, or to assume that she'd gone asleep, and they waxed audible. It was mostly Noyes and Fergusson talking, with the captain stubbornly refusing something they asked.

"No, no, no . . . no," the captain would blubber.

Later his voice changed sharply. He squealed in terror, and she heard a chair pushed back. "No, *no,* Red! You can't do that to me—" A scuffle of feet. Then: "Oh, my God! you can't—" Then there was a gurgling sound, and she heard something thump on the floor.

For a long time, silence. She lay in her small dark cabin, afraid to move, separated from these events only by a thin door.

After a while she heard them drag something out on the deck. She heard a furtive gulping splash as though something of considerable size had been dropped as quietly as possible into the bay.

Somebody came back into the main cabin and crossed it to her door. The door, which had no lock, was opened very slowly.

It was the worst fear she had ever known. Crouched in the canoe, looking pitifully girlish in her wet pajamas and with her wet dark hair clinging to her head, she confessed to Liggett that she had been frozen in fright and could not reach for the automatic under her pillow. She kept her eyes closed and tried to breathe regularly.

Who it was who entered her cabin she did not know. He crossed to the bunk and stood over her—she could sense him there and heard his breathing but she did not open her eyes—for perhaps a full minute. She was lying on her back, paralyzed, fully expecting a knife across her exposed throat.

The man went away. And after a long time she recovered the use of her muscles and crawled out through the porthole to the deck. Only a girl so slight of build could have done it. She did not take anything with her, did not even remember the automatic. She did, however, find the courage to peer through another porthole into the main cabin.

Fergusson stood with his back to her and he was wiping something with a swab of cotton waste. She could not see what it was, but she did see that the waste was stained crimson. On the table were some glasses, a bottle of whisky and Captain Neilson's big Webley revolver. Ende and Noyes were on their knees, scrubbing the floor.

"All I could think of was to get ashore, to you." She rubbed her hands together, looking at them. "I didn't make a sound when I entered the water. And I swam very quietly."

Liggett nodded. He asked if she knew whether Neilson's revolver was the only firearm aboard the schooner, and she said she believed it was, excepting her own automatic which she supposed was still under her pillow. Again he nodded, staring at the blurred gray shape of the schooner a hundred yards away.

At last he said, "Think you would be all right if I took you to the house and left you alone there for a little while?"

"What are you going to do?"

"Visit the *Idriess.* Maybe I'll bring the three of them back with me, and maybe

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I'll never let them know I was there. It all depends on how things look."

She shook her head. She no longer trembled and the fear had gone out of her eyes. She was a stubborn little thing.

"No, I'm going with you."

HE DID not, as she had expected, make loud objections. He only nodded, seemingly indifferent. They said nothing more as he paddled back to the dock. He fetched her a raincoat and a pair of felt bedroom slippers. He put on tennis sneaks and strapped his gun belt around his waist. But he let her take the stern paddle on the way to the *Idriess,* he himself getting in the extreme bow.

"Stay in the boat," he whispered, "and if you hear any trouble, push right off."

But he knew that this latter command would not be obeyed.

When ghost-like the canoe slipped under the bow overhang Terry Ashley held it motionless and Liggett rose, grasped the bowsprit and silently drew himself up. The *Idriess* was not large. She was an old-timer in these parts, and Liggett had more than once been aboard. He remembered the layout. She was anchored fore and aft so that she would not swing with the tide. No watch was kept. He went aft, and peered through a port.

Three men sat around a table. It was Liggett's first sight of Noyes, a squat, powerfully built, turret-like man with a thick head which seemed to work on a swivel and a body from which you expected to hear the sound of clanking as it moved.

The Webley was on the table, Fergusson's right hand resting on its butt while his forefinger was crooked around the trigger. The muzzle was pointed toward the door, at which from time to time Fergusson glanced nervously.

Had Liggett been alone he might have chanced a sudden entrance and banked on surprise and his own pistol. But there was Terry to remember. At the first sound of shooting she would climb aboard and try to help him, try to do her part. If he were killed or seriously hurt, she would be at their mercy.

Liggett did not like to back away. But he did so.

He found the porthole leading from Terry's cabin, and marveled that she had crawled out of it, for the opening was so small he had trouble getting his arm and shoulder through it. His hand fumbled for and found the little automatic under the pillow.

"I'll 'ave another look at the filly," he heard Ende say, and the doorknob was turned.

Liggett estimated that he would not have time to withdraw arm, hand, shoulder. Instead he lifted the automatic, clicked off the safety catch. Had Ende opened the door then he would have found himself looking down the barrel of that shiny wicked little weapon, scant inches from his nose. It is probable too that this would have been his last living observation; for Liggett, though he had no definite plan, was disinclined in the circumstances to fool around with mere threats.

But Ende paused, hand on knob. One of the others had evidently addressed him. "If she's awike we'll find out how much she knows," Liggett heard him say. "Aye? Yerse, we'll likely 'ave to do that anywie. An' this Liggett bloke too. A clean sweep of it, aye?"

This Liggett bloke meanwhile was retreating. He had holstered his revolver but he held the automatic in his right hand and the safety catch was still off. He was starting to climb out on the bowsprit when Ende's voice split the silence of the night. "She ain't here! She's got awie!" Fergusson came running out on deck, a flashlight in his left hand, the Webley in his right.

It was by sheer chance that Fergusson swung the beam forward so that it fell upon Liggett. He did this just as Liggett, needing both hands, tossed the automatic into Terry Ashley's lap.

For Terry was there with the canoe, exactly in position.

Liggett dropped off the bowsprit as the

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Webley roared twice. It was a big-calibered weapon and made a great noise.

THE outrigger held the canoe steady. Liggett grabbed a paddle. Terry, already paddling, tried to turn the craft shoreward, but Liggett, stronger, forced it the other way.

"No, no!" he whispered. "That's just what they'll expect us to do!"

He was right. A moment later the beam of the flashlight was sweeping the water between schooner and dock, revealing nothing; while the canoe slished off in the direction of Nam-Nam.

The rain which had been threatening for hours did not come, but clouds remained very low, and there was no moon, there were no stars. Very soon the schooner was lost from sight. They brought the paddles in and rested, breathing hard.

"You—you're not hurt?"

"No. Did you get your automatic?"

"Yes, I have it. What now?"

He shrugged, not being certain of this himself.

"We'll wait a while, until they get tired of using that flash. Then we'll make a big half-circle around the *Idriess* and go back to the house. In the morning—" He shrugged again. "I don't know. But I have an idea the next move will be up to them, and if we're in the house with my two rifles and two shotguns we'll have every advantage. There's plenty of canned food."

Half an hour later as they were nearing the dock the water between the canoe and the outrigger, which had been flat as a teatray, abruptly became a turmoil. There were choppy splashes, a clacking sound, a swish. Something white and shapeless appeared at the side of the canoe. It was struck once, twice. It went under, then came up again, rolling.

Sharks! Four or five of them at least. And the hideously mutilated thing for which they battled rocked helpless; great chunks of flesh had been ripped out of it, and the head rolled back as though almost independent of the body.

Liggett cried, "Keep your arms inside!"

With his paddle he struck at a black snout. It disappeared, but there was another one immediately, and another. There was a flash of white. The hideous floating thing rollicked as though in a gruesome attempt at gayety. Again and again it jumped from the shock of attacks from below. It jerked and bobbed marionette-fashion.

Liggett held his paddle in his right hand while with his left he reached over the side—the very thing he had warned the girl against. His hand found linen, a lapel. It was torn away as though it were that much tissue paper, and what had been Captain Neilson was pulled under the surface again. The blank, bitten face, the last thing to disappear, seemed dumbly to implore assistance—and then blackness covered it. Several yards away, on the other side of the boat, a shark broke water. After that there was only silence, and not a ripple.

They lingered thereabouts for half an hour but there was no other sign of the body or the sharks. The *corpus delicti* as far as they were concerned consisted only of the bit of linen torn from the coat by Liggett when he had tried to haul Neilson's corpse aboard.

They said very little. Each had been vouchsafed a good look at Neilson, and the sight had not been one to stimulate conversation. Neither, indeed, felt oversure of his stomach.

The girl's face was ashy.

Neilson's throat had been cut from ear to ear. There had been a piece of rope around his middle, and presumably a weight had been tied to this. Perhaps the weight, poorly fastened, had slipped off; perhaps the sharks had knocked or bitten it off; or it might be that Fergusson himself was responsible, the shock of those two shots from the Webley loosening the weight and releasing the body. Whatever it was, they could be tolerably sure that they would never again see what remained of Neilson, which was just as well.

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AT THE house they moped, not wanting to talk, not able to make a pretense of sleeping. Besides, they kept a sort of watch, one or the other always looking across the bay. The *Idriess* was a mere formless blob, but they could see the dock and they would have seen the dinghy had it been landed there.

Liggett's theory was that they should expect attack.

"The only thing they can do now is kill us both," he explained. "We know about Neilson, so they've got to shut our mouths. I suppose they have ways of keeping their own two black boys quiet, and of course my hillbillies here would take to their heels at a moment's notice, as we've seen. That leaves us. And getting rid of the bodies afterward, as we've also seen, would be very easy."

To keep themselves busy, to keep from brooding, each wrote a detailed statement of what he had seen and heard. They signed these statements, and Liggett put them away in his desk.

"Now I'll make coffee. The house boy's locked up in the storehouse down there with the rest of 'em, but we can get our own breakfast. As soon as it gets light enough I want to go down there and make sure everything's all right."

She set the table. It was the first time she had done anything like this for him; and the homeliness of the task, and its implication of familiarity, gave her a strange thrill.

He kept watch while she did this. Once, finding that he still inanely held the piece of linen torn from Neilson's coat, he thrust this irritably away. It fell on a chair.

"Now if you'll show me where the coffee's kept—"

He said, "Let's go down and have a listen at the storehouse first. It's light enough now."

The dawn this day did not come up like thunder but rather with patent reluctance, oozingly. The streets of the little bamboo-and-thatch village were smeared sparingly with its light. Eight hours earlier this had been a busy place and teemed with life; but not even a dog stirred now.

The storehouse too stood blank and bare, and utterly silent. They listened at its doors but could hear nothing.

Liggett had observed in the increasing light that the dinghy was no longer lashed to the deck of the *Idriess*, and he was troubled by this fact. However, he said nothing about it to Terry, who looked up at him, small, tired but with a light of hope in her eyes. Her lips were not fully closed. She seemed to stand on tiptoe, stretching up, and there was a quality of breathlessness in her face.

"Well, I think that maybe we're beginning to come to the end of our troubles. Thanks to you," he added softly.

She seemed to try to say something, then to give up the effort. He leaned lower. Her eyes began to close.

The earth beneath them thudded violently and seemed to drop at least six inches, twice. The shocks were much greater than any tremor. Terry and Liggett felt them heavily in the heels, up their legs and bodies, right up their spines to the backs of their heads. They felt them like two swift blows with a padded hammer of tremendous weight.

A foot taller than the girl, he looked up, looked over her head. When she saw the expression in his eyes, she wheeled, crying out.

THOUGH the sky was clear and there was very little breeze the waters of the bay were choppy as though in a gale. They were agitated from beneath. Nam-Nam solemnly coughed. It was precisely like that—a stupendous subterranean cough, hollow, throaty, portentous. Out of its mouth, scarcely a mile from where Liggett and Terry stood, a column of white smoke rolled skyward in undulating folds. This was no mere lingering loitering cloud twisting itself around the chunky hill as though for decoration. This was real smoke from a real fire.

An explosion. The earth jumped again, fiercely this time, as though in rage, as

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though it were trying to tear itself to fragments and be free forever of fixity, flying into the cold outer spaces, ceasing to exist as one thing. Dark-brown clouds up-cushioned among the white pouring out of Nam-Nam.

This column of smoke, like the smoke of some immense campfire in a change of wind, leaned toward them. It had previously been upright. Nam-Nam coughed again, the earth shook, more brown smoke discolored the white.

They ran for the house. It was an instinctive but not a sensible thing to do, as they would soon come to see. If they were to be safe anywhere it would be in an open space out-of-doors where no shattered, dislodged or uprooted thing could fall upon them; but they did not think of this when their panic told them to take cover.

The smoke reached them before they reached the house. It swam past in long ribbons, moving very fast yet seeming to be languid. It was sharp and sulphurous, acrid too, like the smoke of old-fashioned black gunpowder. It stung their eyes and noses. In it and all around it were tiny flicks of sand which battered their faces and snuggled slyly into the crevices of their clothing.

Indoors, they stared at one another. It was Liggett who recovered first. He shook his head.

"We really shouldn't be here," he muttered.

His eyes moved back and forth. For all the fact that the world seemed to be falling apart, something immediate, something here in the room, troubled his consciousness.

Suddenly he saw what it was. The scrap of linen from Captain Neilson's coat was no longer on the chair!

There was some breeze, carrying volcano smoke through the house, but it was not strong enough to have dislodged the piece of linen; nor was there any place it could have fallen. Nevertheless he looked for it a little while. He did not find it.

Grimly he went to the desk. Receipts, letters, accounts were in place and apparently untouched, but the statements he and Terry had written and signed only a few hours ago were gone.

"What's the matter?" she asked quietly.

"Excuse me a minute," he muttered, and went into the room where he kept his medicines—and his guns.

When he returned he was paler and more grave than she had ever seen him.

"We'd better get out of here," he said, "and the sooner the better."

V

OUTSIDE was inferno. Nam-Nam was small but it held hell—and it was distributing its contents. Smoke in thick sluggish ribbons floated everywhere aimlessly, now obscuring all objects, now suddenly revealing them for a little while. The sun incredibly was shining all the while, but it could not penetrate the smoke and could only smash earthward in sheets of light between the ribbons, causing the sand with which the air was filled to glitter a brilliant brownish-gray.

This sand, unlike the smoke, was unvarying. It was everywhere. It fell constantly and soundlessly upon everything; so that the earth, the grass, the dock, the trees and shrubbery, the house itself, were blanketed. Itself harmless-seeming, it was terrible in its amount and the effect it had. It deadened the world. Perhaps it was volcanic ash, but surely it was not as Terry and Liggett had pictured that substance. It was not like an ash at all. It was gritty. It was, in fact, powdered pumice, the same stuff the dentist cleans your teeth with, except that it had not been refined.

Where it fell, it killed; and it fell everywhere. It abolished green. In a matter of minutes the grass had been obliterated by it, and every leaf was stripped from the hibiscus hedge, every leaf and petal from that garden in the making of which Liggett had toiled so many weary, fond hours. Without sound or any outward show of malevolence, it swiftly created des-

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olation. Each tree stood gaunt and bare. Each bush had become a skeleton.

"Let me go first. I want to look around."

He stepped out of the front door and onto the veranda. From his left came a sharp crack, and splinters flew from the doorway six or seven inches behind his head. He sprang back.

"Keep away from the windows!"

On hands and knees he crawled into the kitchen, got a broom, put his topee on this, raised it above the sill of a window on the west side of the house. A shot. The topee spun wildly, and when Liggett took it down there was a hole through it.

He did the same thing in one of the back windows. This time the shot was a deep boom, and instead of one bullet seven tiny lead pellets tore through the topee.

"He's got one of the shotguns, back there by the water tank."

Liggett sat on the floor, facing the girl, who was similarly seated. He took out his revolver, broke it, spun the chambers.

"I'm afraid we're in for it," he said. "You see, they paid us a visit. They must have landed the dinghy some time last night on the other side of the bay and walked around. They were lucky enough to arrive here when we were out. And they broke into my gun closet—I'd thoughtfully showed Ende where it was when I confiscated that Very pistol—and took both my rifles and both my shotguns, along with every bit of ammunition. And now they've got us surrounded.

"Why they didn't pop at us while we were coming up from the storehouse, before we got back into the house here, I don't know. Maybe they hadn't got themselves into position by that time. Or maybe they were still too stunned by the way Nam-Nam was acting up. Anyway here we are—and we can't leave."

She kept her chin high.

"Well, you said yourself that there's plenty of tinned food. And we'll probably get used to going around on our hands and knees pretty soon. We might even get to like it. And when night comes we can sneak out and make for the jungle."

He said, "Yes" without enthusiasm. Night might aid them; but it would aid even more the men who sought to slay them. When night came these men could approach the house near enough to throw lighted torches. Then Terry and he would be obliged to run for it, with fire at their backs. They'd be perfect targets.

They might remain and fight the fire, but it would probably be started in two or three places at once.

Besides, Liggett hadn't forgotten that there were more than three hundred pounds of gelatin dynamite stored in this house.

She saw his expression.

"We might slip out some time when the smoke's thickest."

He said, "Yes" again, in the same tone of voice. For the smoke came and went. It might cover their escape for a few yards, and then suddenly expose them. True, it might became thicker, if Nam-Nam did some further coughing; but Nam-Nam was the most highly undependable thing in all the world; and then too, the wind might shift, removing all smoke from the vicinity of the house.

OUTSIDE, the waters of the bay were still curiously agitated, but in contrast the air was motionless. The smoke hung without movement. The pumice, glittering in the sun, fell so languidly that it appeared suspended. The earth for a moment was firm.

Through this sudden silence, and because of it, they heard for the first time the sounds from the storehouse. A yelling, a clamorous wailing, the beating of scores of fists against corrugated iron walls.

"The boys! They'll trample themselves to death down there! The quake's driven them wild with fear again!"

He sprang to his feet. There was a *flut* sound, and something *pinged* into the wall opposite a window. He dropped to his knees at this reminder, but he was trembling with anxiety and eagerness to do something.

"They'll tear themselves to pieces!

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They're all packed together there in the darkness, and the world shaking around them. The pickaninnies and the Marys will simply get trampled to death! I've got to go down!"

She said calmly, "Do you think their lives are worth as much as yours?"

"They're my responsibility," he pointed out. "I despise them, but I've sworn to keep them safe and in good health. You can fight for yourself. You have background and nerve and intelligence, and incidentally a gun. But they're absolutely helpless. If I let them out I'll probably never see them again. But at least it will give them a chance. They haven't any, now."

Still calm, she said, "You'd never get there."

He paused. She was right. He knew the carefully chosen positions of the three men who covered this house with their guns, and he knew that the men would not shift those positions. The storehouse was about two hundred yards distant, on the left as you went out the front door. The house would be between him and the man on the right, who crouched behind a barrier of fallen coconut palms.

The man in back, protected by the water tank, did not have a rifle—there were only two rifles and they had both spoken—but only a shotgun, which would not carry far, and perhaps Neilson's Webley, with which except by luck he could hardly hope to bring a runner down at that distance.

But the third man, the first who had fired at Liggett, was back of the smoke shed; and from this post of vantage he covered the front of the house, every foot of the way down to the storehouse, and indeed the big double doors of that building itself. Even supposing that Liggett could reach his objective unhit, he would certainly be shot in the back before he could unlock and swing open those doors.

He thought of this a moment, while she watched him. Then he muttered, "I think I see a way." He crawled to the kitchen.

When he returned he was carrying, among other articles, a stick about eight inches long and one and a quarter inches thick of some dark putty-like substance.

"Dynamite," he announced casually.

HE WRAPPED this in heavy waxed paper over which he wound adhesive tape. He crimped the ends very carefully. Into one of those ends he fastened a six-inch piece of ordinary Black Azetc safety fuse.

"I wouldn't be able to reach the others, but that smoke shed's possible. It's not a bad building, either. Cost me a lot of money to put up. However . . . You stay here, of course."

"No." She was positive about this, though quiet. She crawled over to him, put a hand on his arm. "This is my plantation practically as much as it is yours, or anyway it will be soon. And besides, I —I don't want you to go anywhere after this without me."

He grinned a little. Knowing that objections would be wasted, he saved his breath. In fact he had been hoping that she would say this. He lifted her chin and kissed her once.

"Okay," he said out of a corner of his mouth. He handed her a duplicate key. "In case I don't make it and you do."

They got nearer the veranda door, and crouched there while he lit the fuse. Squatting, he watched it, deliberately permitting it to burn almost halfway down. Then he turned his head and kissed her again, very quickly.

"Good luck," she whispered. "I'll be right behind you."

He ran outside.

He threw the bomb overhand in a wide arc with his arm held stiff, as men were taught to throw grenades in the World War. As it left his hand he heard the crack of the rifle and felt something burn the upper part of his right shoulder. It was like the sting of a bee, and seemed of no greater importance.

He started to run as he threw the thing. He was running straight toward the smoke

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shed. The explosion was like a push in the chest, but it did not halt him. He only swerved a little to the left, as though he'd stepped on a round slippery stone.

He heard the shotgun bellow, first one barrel, then the other, back by the water tank. Lead pattered against his legs, protected only by cotton pajamas; but it was spent lead; he might as well have been pelted with a handful of pebbles. He kept running.

The padlock was new and stiff, and by the time he had unclicked it Terry Ashley was at his side. She took one door, he took the other.

"Keep back!" The warning was wise; for this time was not as before. This time there was no possibility of checking or diverting the rush. It would have been as foolish as trying to alter the course of a hurricane. The instant those doors were swung back a thundering herd of natives poured out in a wild sweat-shiny mass, men and women and children, bumping one another, scrambling to get ahead of one another, looking neither to right nor left but making by brutish instinct for the hills.

And presently they were gone. They were lost among the coconut trees. A scarlet *lap-lap,* torn off in the rush and not picked up again—for nakedness was their natural state—was all that remained.

Liggett looked at the girl and she looked at him. A wisp of smoke hung between them. But the column out of Nam-Nam's mouth was thin now and feeble, and the volcano no longer coughed, the ground was firm.

He started to say something—and the first bullet broke his left arm just below the elbow and threw him back against the storehouse wall.

HE DIDN'T even feel pain, until afterward. He did not even notice that the revolver had been shocked out of his hand and lay on the ground before him. All he felt was amazement, for he had not expected the men to break cover and give chase, not realizing that they would suppose he and Terry were making a dash for the jungle. He stared at her as though he somehow held her to be guilty—and the second bullet clanged against the corrugated iron next to his head.

That snapped him out of it. Terry had already turned, had gone to one knee, and was shooting her spitty, tiny automatic.

Simon Fergusson fired the rifle as he ran. A few feet behind him, running also, though with less enthusiasm, was Second Mate Noyes, who held a shotgun.

"So it was Ende the dynamite eliminated," thought Liggett, and stooped to pick up the revolver.

The rifle spoke once more, and Fergusson, yelling, cursing, ran toward them.

Suddenly Fergusson fell. He pitched forward on one knee. But he kept his balance; and as Terry Ashley stood helpless, having fired the whole clipful of cartridges from her automatic, he raised the rifle again for a nearer and more careful shot.

Liggett, back against the wall, fired deliberately. He fired over her shoulder. And Fergusson collapsed, and did not move again.

As quickly as that the fight was over. Noyes, for all his appearance of medieval truculence, had no resistance left in him. When Fergusson dropped, Noyes quit. He threw down the shotgun, raised both arms, cried, "Don't shoot! Don't shoot!"

When they had locked him in the storehouse, odorous now and hot, and when they had improvised a splint for Liggett's arm, and disinfected the skin wound on Liggett's right shoulder, and made Fergusson as comfortable as possible—one bullet in the thigh, another, Liggett's, in the muscles of the neck—they turned to the table. Theresa Seldon Ashley put her arms akimbo and clucked her tongue.

"The first time I set a breakfast table for you, and I wanted it to look so nice!"

"It *is* a bit dusty."

It was in fact as dreary a sight as could be imagined, for the cups and saucers and plates and articles of silverware and of linen, though actually new enough, were powdered with gray-brown pumice which

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gave them a lugubrious, almost pertified aspect, as though they were objects excavated after much toil from the ruins of Pompeii. Doleful, they were of a piece with everything about the place now. They fitted the scene, were reminders of the general desolation.

She faced him.

"So, Mr. Liggett! Your crop's blasted, your garden's stripped, your arm's broken, your smoke shed's blown to bits and all your laborers have fled. What are you going to do now?"

"Start building everything up again," he said. But he added, with less confidence: "That is, if I can get—" He paused, embarrassed.

She waggled a tiny forefinger.

"Now suppose you listen to me. Suppose you let *me* talk business for a change—"

•

Seismographic instruments all over that part of the world had recorded and located Nam-Nam's spree, and wireless messages were sent. Before noon a seaplane from Lao landed in the tranquil bay, and the pilot, an assistant D.O. and two physicians complete with black cases came ashore in a little collapsible boat. Liggett met them at the dock.

The assistant D.O. shook his head.

"You shouldn't really be out here trying to run a place like this alone, Liggett. You ought to at least have a foreman."

"I have," said Liggett, "now."

"Eh?"

"My partner."

"I didn't know you were mar— Or do you mean business partner perhaps?"

"Well, both ways. She'd be down here to greet you except that she's so busy cleaning up the house." He smiled a little. "She says she never could stand dust."

It might have happened here!

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Storm thought he was quite a detective until a voice behind him told him to get his hands into the air

Cancelled in Red

By HUGH PENTECOST

Start now this exciting yarn of the danger and death that lurked around the most fabulous bits of colored paper in the world. The Dodd Mead 1939 Prize Mystery

FOR years Larry Storm and every other honest stamp-dealer have been trying to get something on the glib and rascally Max Adrian, whose ways of turning a dishonest penny are both devious and varied. Larry sees his chance to get Adrian when Lucia Warren, the daughter of an old client, comes to him for help.

Her father's collection, she says, has been auctioned off by Adrian, bringing far less than he had paid for it. Larry tells her that Adrian has probably exchanged duplicates for the items in Warren's collection and sold the substitutes, at auction, pocketing the valuable specimens.

Meanwhile, Larry's friend Lon Nicholas has gone to Adrian's office to kill him, for Nicholas is convinced that Adrian is the "Rivero" who years before had cheated him of forty thousand dollars and driven him out of business.

Larry arrives in time to take Nicholas' gun away from him, and warns Adrian that he, too, is out to get him. "You overstepped yourself in this Warren business. And I won't rest until you're out in the street—or in the river!"

This story began in last week's Argosy

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HIS threat is overheard by the deceptively mild-voiced Police-inspector Bradley, who has also seen Larry Nicholas' gun. "If anything should happen to Adrian," he warns Larry later, "the spot you'll be in won't be nice. It won't be nice at all!"

Larry takes Lon Nicholas to his apartment, unloads the gun, and leaves it in the desk drawer. With Nicholas is Bones, the office boy, who has been warned not to let Nicholas out. Larry returns to his office to meet Lucia Warren, and finds another visitor—Paul Gregory, secretary and agent for the enormously wealthy collector, Jasper Hale. A chance at getting a portion of Hale's tremendous business is too much for Larry to miss; he grants Gregory an interview.

Gregory confides in him that he has accidentally destroyed one of the most valuable stamps in the Hale collection; he is mortally afraid of what Hale will do when he discovers that the stamp is missing, and it is imperative that Larry secure another within a few days.

Larry, not very hopeful, agrees to do what he can; but he is convinced that there is something distinctly shady about Gregory and his story. . . .

CHAPTER VI

FRIENDS OF ADRIAN

LARRY made several telephone calls after that to other dealers. Each time he asked the same question. "Know where I can pick up a perfect U. S. Number 22 . . . the green St. Louis Bear?"

It wasn't until he made his fourth call that he got any lead at all. "I don't know of any for sale," said Spencer, a neighboring dealer. "But there's a guy named Howard Stevens who has specialized in U. S. stamps and who's now trying to sell his collection. I've never seen it, but it's just possible he might have a 22."

Larry had been writing on a scratch pad as Dick Spencer talked. "Where'll I find this Stevens?"

"I haven't his address, but he hangs out around the Collectors' Club. Mind you, Larry, I don't know anything about the quality of his collection. I've heard that he bought a lot of cripples. It may be a wild goose chase, but it's the only thing I can think of."

"Well, thanks anyway, Spence. I'll do something for you sometime," Larry said.

"I can imagine," said Spencer.

Larry got up from his desk and went into the outer office. He glanced at his watch. It was quarter of five.

"Look, Ellen, would you mind staying a bit late?"

"I thought I was getting the night off while you dined and wined your Miss Warren," said Ellen.

"Don't be so feminine," Larry said. "I've got ideas. I want to have a look at that stamp of Lon's at the Collectors' Club. Maybe I can kill two birds with one stone. There's a guy up there who may have the item Gregory wants."

"What do I do, stay here and pray for you?" Ellen asked.

"You stay here and wait for Miss Warren," said Larry. "If I'm late, you regale her with funny stories—tell her what a swell guy I am. The lady may still have some doubts about who cheated who, though I think I convinced her that Adrian is her man."

"I am your secretary," Ellen said. "I am glad to talk business for you with anyone. I am *not* going to give you a buildup with your girl friends."

"Lucia is not a girl friend—she's a customer."

"But you have hopes," said Ellen.

"My hopes at the moment are centered around finding a slow and unpleasant method of ending your life," said Larry. "Now, be nice to Lucia and explain that I'm late because I'm investigating an angle of her case."

"Shall I tell her how particular you are about your eggs not being boiled over two minutes?"

"Goodbye," said Larry, firmly.

IT WAS a quarter to six when Larry came down the broad staircase from the second floor of the Collectors' Club where the Fargoe collection was on exhibition. He had examined the French Number 8 which Lon Nicholas was certain was the one stolen by the mythical Oscar

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Rivero. Lon had been right about the stamp. It was a beautiful specimen of the yellowish-vermillion one-franc item, bearing the head of Ceres on its circular center.

There was not a single mark or blemish that would help to distinguish it from any other mint condition sample. Lon would never be able to establish ownership in court, no matter how strong his own convictions were.

Beyond the large, somber lounge of the Collectors' Club was the Smoke Room, attractively paneled in walnut, and furnished with deep leather chairs. Across one corner of the room was a bar. Larry went over to it. The bartender greeted him with something almost like affection. Larry's visits were infrequent, but they often had a tendency to be lively.

"It's nice to see you, Mr. Storm. You don't get around much."

"I'm a slave in the marts of trade." Larry grinned. "A scotch and soda, Mac. By the way, do you know a Mr. Howard Stevens? I believe he's a member."

The bartender made a face. "Sure I know him," he said.

"Is he around now?"

The bartender rubbed the top of the bar vigorously with a rag. "He's in the washroom," he said.

Larry sipped his drink. "Point him out to me when he comes out, Mac."

Mac made a noise between pursed lips. "He may not be out for a long time," he said. "He's sick."

"Drunk?" Larry asked.

"He's a teetotaler," said Mac. "But it don't do him any good. He's got one hell of a stomach."

Larry finished his drink and walked over to the washroom door. He went in. The first section of the washroom consisted of a row of wash basins on one side, and a long table, topped by mirror, on the other. On the table were brushes and combs, nail files, talcum powders, hair tonics, tins of aspirin, bottles of bromo seltzer.

As Larry came in he saw a man leaning with his back against one of the wash basins smoking a long, thin cigar. He was a short, stocky, swarthy man, with long arms that hung down like an ape's. He had very shrewd black eyes and a huge, beaklike nose. Larry recognized him as Ezra Luckman, a collector of Newfoundland issues. Luckman looked up at Larry and waved his cigar in greeting.

"Hello, Storm. How's tricks?"

"We're still giving the public the usual going over," said Larry.

From beyond the swinging wicker doors that led into the second section of the washroom came the unmistakable sounds of a stomach in distress.

"Howard Stevens," said Luckman, as if that explained everything.

"I was looking for him," said Larry.

"Better put it off till another day," said Luckman. "When Stevens is sick, he's sick."

THE sounds from the other side of the wicker doors indicated that there was a certain amount of truth in Luckman's statement.

"It's a case of mind and medicine over health," said Luckman. "He's a walking drug store. As soon as anything upsets him, he takes about six different kinds of pills and is promptly sick as hell."

"What's upset him?" Larry asked.

Luckman smiled, a tight-lipped smile. "Mr. Stevens," he said, dryly, "has just taken one of the world's finest rookings."

"Somebody sell him a cripple?" Larry asked.

Luckman laughed and tugged at the end of his long nose. "A whole collection of 'em," he said. "He's been a sucker for every shyster dealer in town for years. And he's one of those guys who bought stamps as an investment. Know the type?"

"Stamps are as good as Government bonds," said Larry. "I know the line."

"Probably used it yourself," Luckman chuckled. "Anyhow, Stevens has collected for years—United States issues. He went broke recently and decided to sell his collection."

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"Ah," said Larry. "Low salvage value, eh?"

Luckman laughed again. "Listen!" he said. "Stevens spent over seventeen grand for his collection. He had about a thousand dollars' worth of uncancelled stamps . . . I mean, face value. He tried to sell the lot to Scott and Morganthau and a couple of other big dealers. They wouldn't make an offer, although they agreed to act as auctioneers for him."

"So what?"

"So he sells the whole collection for six hundred bucks—cash!" Luckman's shoulders heaved in silent mirth. From the other side of the wicker doors came the sounds of Mr. Stevens in distress again. "Six hundred bucks! With a thousand dollars' worth of stamps that could have been used for postage or been redeemed at any bank for their face value! What he did was to sell a thousand dollars in ready money for six hundred."

"Who made him this magnanimous offer?" Larry asked.

The smile left Luckman's thin lips. "A guy named Max Adrian," he said, and his voice was suddenly harsh.

Larry's eyes sharpened. He took a cigarette from his case and tapped it thoughtfully on the back of his hand. "A smart deal—for Adrian," he said.

"Of course there's nothing technically dishonest about it," Luckman said. "Stevens didn't have to accept the offer. But it was a swine's trick, all the same. Stevens needs all the dough he can get his hands on. Needs it badly."

"It's funny," Larry said, "but that's the third time today I've heard a tale about Adrian."

Luckman's teeth clamped tightly over the end of his cigar. "Adrian's riding for a fall," he said.

"Has he done something to you?" Larry asked.

Luckman did not reply for a moment. Then he looked at Larry. "If he had," he said, "I'd know how to deal with him. I'd know *exactly* how to deal with him."

Evidently Luckman wasn't going to talk. Larry glanced toward the doors from behind which still came sounds of agony.

"Get him some ginger ale with the white of an egg mixed in," he said. "That'll fix him."

Luckman's good humor returned. "He wouldn't take it," he said. "It might make him well. He likes being sick. It makes him an object of sympathy."

"Why are you playing nursemaid?"

"I figured maybe I could help him," Luckman said. His eyes narrowed. "With Adrian, I mean."

CHAPTER VII

DEATH OF A HEEL

LARRY left Luckman and went out into the Smoke Room. He walked to the telephone booth across from the bar, dropped a nickel in the slot, and dialed his office. The bell at the other end rang hopefully, but there was no answer.

"Damn that girl!" said Larry.

He hesitated a moment, then fished the nickel out and called his apartment. The phone was answered almost immediately. It was Ellen.

"For the love of Pete, what are you doing there?" Larry demanded. "Where's Lucia? Is she with you?"

"I haven't the faintest idea where she is," said Ellen. Something in the tone of her voice kept Larry silent. "Lon's gone, Larry!"

"What!"

"He's gone. I got worried about Bones being alone with him and I phoned. Nobody answered. The hall boy couldn't raise anybody. So I came up here and let myself in with your extra key. Lon had asked Bones to get him something in the bathroom, and then locked him in! Lon's skipped."

"Oh, my God!" Larry groaned. Then his hand tightened on the receiver. "Ellen, look in the top right-hand drawer of my desk. There should be a revolver there." There was a long, painful silence. Then Ellen's voice came again:

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"Gone, too," she said.

"The fool!" Larry said, bitterly.

"Listen, Larry. The minute I found out what had happened, I called Adrian and warned him. Then I sent Bones downtown to wait around outside Adrian's office building . . . Adrian's working late. If Lon turns up, Bones will catch him. It was the only thing I could think of to do. You'd better come back here and wait for Bones to report."

"What about Lucia—she'll think I stood her up," Larry said.

"When she finds no one at the office she'll probably telephone you here," Ellen said.

"She doesn't know my number."

"Don't tell me she can't read!" said Ellen.

LARRY barged into his apartment about ten minutes later to find Ellen sitting on the couch by the fire, a basket of mending beside her. Larry stopped in the doorway.

"What on earth are you doing?"

"Darning your socks," she said.

"Lord! A potential murderer is running around loose and you sit there being calmly domestic."

"The laundry does a terrible job on them," Ellen said reasonably.

Larry walked across to the desk and opened the drawer where he had put Lon's gun. He had to be sure. It was definitely gone. Then he noticed that Ellen had set a small table in front of the fire. It was spread with a red and white checked cloth, red and white Ironstone plates, and silver salt and pepper mills. A big wooden bowl of salad reposed in the center. Ellen saw his glance.

"You'll have to stay here till we get some word of Lon," she explained, "so I thought you'd want to eat."

"But I'm dining with Lucia Warren!"

"There's enough for her," said Ellen. "I ordered some chops at your butcher's."

"You ought to get married," Larry said. "You think of everything. There are probably hundreds of men who would like to have their lives arranged for them. Why don't you find one—*and let me alone!* I like to make my own plans!"

"I know," said Ellen. "Have you any shirts that need buttons?"

"Ellen! Stop it! I should go down to Adrian's!" He looked at his watch. It was after seven. "Lucia should have rung up by now if she's going to. This is a mess."

"Bones called just before you came in," said Ellen. "Lon hasn't showed at Adrian's. You'd better sit tight till Bones picks him up."

"It's a wonder you wouldn't wait till tomorrow to tell me that," Larry said. "Well, if we're going to eat . . . let's eat!"

He walked over to the sideboard and poured himself a highball in a tall, dark blue glass. Ellen slipped out into the kitchen. Larry lit a cigarette and strode restlessly up and down the room, sipping at his drink.

"I found a couple of new members of the Anti-Adrian Club," he shouted to Ellen.

"Who?"

Larry could hear chops sizzling under the broiler. "A fellow named Stevens. Adrian took him to the cleaners. And Ezra Luckman, of all people. I don't know what Adrian did to Luckman, but Luckman doesn't like him—plenty."

Ellen returned presently with the platter of chops. She lighted the candles and they sat down.

"This is a waste of time," Larry protested. "Lucia will probably call any minute . . . then I'll have to eat dinner all over again."

"Have you taken a header for the beautiful Miss Warren?" Ellen asked, calmly.

"So you're jealous!" Larry said.

"Green!" Ellen said, and grinned at him. "Have you arranged with Miss Warren what she's to pay you for your time on this case of hers?"

"Of course not," he said. "Her father was an old friend. I owe it to him to do what I can for his daughter."

"If I were you, I'd stay clear of the

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whole business. When I found Lon I'd lock him up in some nice home for alcoholics and I'd forget about Adrian. You're not a detective, Larry. If she wants someone to get evidence against Adrian let her hire a professional."

LARRY was just reaching for the salad bowl when the phone rang. "There!" he said. "That'll be my glamour girl." He went over and picked up the receiver. It was Lucia. Her voice seemed a little queer, but Larry put it down to pique.

"I'm sorry I missed you," he said, "but I can explain how it happened. You see, I—"

"Please, Larry, let me talk," said Lucia, urgently. It sounded to Larry as if she were breathing hard—as if she'd been running. "I'm in a pay station in a cigar store at 53 Nassau Street. Can you remember that, Larry?"

"I know where it is," Larry said. "I feel like a heel, Lucia, with you still waiting down there. I really—"

"Larry! *Please listen!*" Her voice shook. "Adrian has been murdered!"

Larry spoke to Ellen, his hand covering the mouthpiece of the phone. "Lon's done it!" he said, grimly.

"Can you come down right away?" Lucia was asking. "I'll wait for you here."

"Of course I'll come at once," Larry assured her. "But there's no reason for you to get mixed up in this, Lucia."

"But I *am* mixed up in it," she cried. She was close to hysteria. "I'm afraid I'm *badly* mixed up in it!"

"Lucia!"

"Please, please *hurry*, Larry!"

As Larry put down the telephone and turned to confront Ellen, the light from the fire threw dark, hard shadows over his face. Ellen came across the room to him.

"I'm terribly sorry, Larry," she said. "But you did everything you could. After all, it wasn't really your responsibility. Have they—have they caught Lon?"

He looked at her blankly for a moment. "I don't know if Lon did it, Lucia didn't say. She just said that Adrian had been murdered and that *she* was mixed up in it. I've got to go down there."

"Larry! You mean she did it?" Ellen asked.

"Of course she didn't do it!" Larry said, sharply. He was already on the way to the foyer.

"How do you know? Did she say so?" Ellen followed him. She was taking her own coat and hat from the hall closet as she spoke.

"It *must* have been Lon," Larry said. "And it's my fault. I shouldn't have let him out of my sight!" He looked at Ellen. "Where are you going?"

"With you," said Ellen, calmly.

"You're staying out of this," he told her. "There are enough people messed up in it as it is!"

"I'm going to find Bones," Ellen said. "He must be gotten out of there before he puts his foot in it somehow." She opened the front door. "It won't disturb you if I ride downtown in the same taxi with you, will it?"

"Don't be an ass, my pet," he said. "And you're right about Bones. If he saw anything, if he knows anything, I want to talk to him before the cops do."

"Haven't the police been called?" Ellen asked.

"I don't know," he said. "Lucia didn't say anything except that she was in trouble."

"Why not let Miss Warren get out of her own trouble?" Ellen suggested. "Your job is to get Lon and Bones out of this if you can."

"Don't be crude, my sweet," said Larry. "What earthly reason could Lucia have for murdering Adrian?"

The elevator had arrived and Ellen said matter-of-factly: "Four percent of fifty thousand dollars is two thousand dollars. Four percent of two hundred thousand dollars is eight thousand dollars."

LARRY just looked at her. When they got out of the elevator he walked ahead of her to the street where he hailed

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a cab. He instructed the driver to go to 53 Nassau Street and not to worry too much about the speed laws. He was silent when they got into the cab.

"If Lon *didn't* do it," Ellen said, placidly, "you've got to find him and cover for him. He'll be a prime suspect after today. He'll have to have an iron-clad alibi."

Larry made an impatient gesture, "I'd like to cover up for him in any case," he said. "Adrian had it coming to him. You can't really blame Lon, for taking justice into his own hands."

"If he did it," said Ellen. She was clinging tightly to Larry's arm as the cab swerved giddily around a corner. "Of course, there are other possibilities, Larry. This seems to be a sort of open season on Adrian. There's Mr. Luckman and . . . who's the other one?"

"Stevens," said Larry, thoughtfully.

"And Miss Warren," Ellen went on. "After all, she was willing to go in for safe breaking. Maybe she got a little tougher. Maybe she . . ."

"Oh, nuts!" said Larry. "Stop harping on that, Ellen. It's a ridiculous notion."

"But she's mixed up in it . . . she said so!" Ellen persisted.

"So am I, so is Bones, so are you," snapped Larry. "But we didn't kill him."

"I can only swear to myself," said Ellen, quietly. "For all I know you killed him. And Bones said over the phone he'd been there, didn't he? And everybody on Nassau Street knows you've been calling Adrian a crook for years."

"Ellen!" Larry said, in an irritated voice. "Stop pretending that you actually suspect—?"

"I'm talking like a cop," said Ellen. "You saw Adrian today, didn't you? You threatened him, didn't you? He laughed at you, didn't he? Maybe you went back and polished him off!"

Larry tossed his cigarette out the open cab window. "I'm not in the mood to play games," he said. "You know where I've been. You're my alibi."

"I'm your faithful secretary," she said, dryly. "I'd swear to anything. I doubt if the police would consider me a dependable witness. Now let's take Miss Warren. She's been cheated out of about six thousand a year by Adrian. It's a lovely motive, Larry. And don't the police always hunt for the woman in a murder case?"

"They're going to be hunting for you," Larry said, "with a straitjacket!"

They rode in silence for the remaining distance. The cab pulled up before the corner cigar store with a screeching of brakes. Ellen sat where she was.

"Have him take me down a couple of blocks further, Larry, to that bar opposite Adrian's office."

Larry nodded. "When you find Bones get him out of the neighborhood. And if he has any idea where Lon is—"

"Leave it to me," said Ellen.

CHAPTER VIII

ERRAND BY NIGHT

LARRY went into the cigar store. As he entered he saw Lucia standing at the far end of the shop near the telephone booths. Her coat was a magnificent knee-length silver fox that concealed the dress beneath it . . . a dinner dress to judge by the length of the black velvet skirt. Two large orchids were pinned at her left shoulder. At the sight of Larry she tossed away her cigarette and came quickly forward to meet him. Her face was dead white, and he saw that her lips were trembling. She reached out both her hands and he took them in his, held them firmly.

"I thought you'd never come, Larry!"

"Made it as quickly as I could," he said. Her hands were shaking violently. He glanced around at the clerk who was eyeing them with interest. "Take it easy, darling. We can't talk in here. There's a bar just across the street." He tucked her arm through his and led her out toward Conley's Tap Room. They paused in the center of the street while a taxi swept past them. Larry spoke matter-of-factly.

"Did you kill him, Lucia?"

"Larry!" Her fingernails bit into the flesh of his wrists.

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"All right," he said cheerfully. "I just wanted to know how much time we have to talk. First we're going to have a drink, and then you're going to tell me exactly what's happened and what kind of trouble you're in." He held open Conley's door and followed her into the smoky bar room. They sat down at a little booth in the corner, and a waiter in a dirty apron sidled up to them. Larry ordered brandy.

Lucia clasped her hands together in front of her on the table. She lowered her head, avoiding Larry's look.

"Oh, Larry, it was awful!" Her voice betrayed the hysteria that was still very close to the surface. "I walked into his office, and—and there he was, lying on the floor, a little round hole in his forehead." A shudder shook her whole body. "His—his eyes were open, staring at me. For a moment I thought he was still alive."

"Take it easy," said Larry. "Wait till you've had this drink."

The waiter brought two ponies of brandy, slid them across the table, and shuffled off.

"Drink," Larry said. Lucia lifted the glass to her lips. She swallowed with difficulty, as if her throat muscles were tightly contracted. "Now," Larry urged her, gently, "let's have it. What were you doing in Adrian's office?" She would not look at him.

"I CAME down to your office with the catalogue about five-thirty," she said, finally, "but there wasn't anyone there. I supposed your employees had gone home for the night, but I expected you'd be along any moment. So I waited. I guess I must have waited for about half an hour and then I went somewhere—I can't remember where—near your office and had a cocktail. That might have taken twenty minutes or half an hour. Then I went back to your office again, thinking you'd surely have arrived by then." She glanced up at Larry at last and a smile struggled on her lips. "I was pretty mad at being stood up!"

"I'm sorry," said Larry. "I'll explain what happened some time."

She nodded. "I knew there must be a good reason, but I was irritated all the same—being way downtown and not knowing what to do with the catalogue or where to reach you. Being in a temper made me think of Adrian. From the way you'd explained things this morning I was convinced he had cheated me at the auction of Father's collection."

"No doubt of it," said Larry, quietly.

"I wanted to see him," she said, "and accuse him of it. It was probably a crazy idea, but I was mad, Larry."

"Don't blame you," he said.

"So I telephoned him," Lucia continued. "He was still at his office. He told me he had an appointment at seven o'clock, but that he'd be glad to see me at seven-thirty. So I went and had some dinner, and then I went to his office. Oh, Larry—!"

"Finish your brandy," he said, sternly. "Now, go ahead."

"The elevator wasn't running in his building, and I had to walk up to the third floor. His office door was unlocked so I went into the waiting room. There wasn't anyone there. The girl at the reception desk had gone home, I suppose." She hesitated an instant. "I didn't hear anyone talking in the office beyond, so I went ahead and opened the door." She stared at Larry, her eyes dilated. "There he was, lying on the floor and staring up at me, with that little round hole in his forehead."

"And no one else around?" Larry asked, sharply.

"Not a soul, Larry." She crushed out her cigarette. "I—I thought I was going to faint for a minute, and then suddenly I felt very cool and calm. I walked across and looked down at him. I knew he was dead—the way his lips were drawn back from his teeth—the glassy expression of his eyes."

"Take it easy," said Larry, gently. She had started to tremble again.

"As I stood there, Larry, I saw a gun on the edge of the desk. I—I picked it up and looked at it."

"Have on your gloves?" he asked.

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She shook her head, dully. "Then—then I thought the police ought to be notified. I walked around behind the desk to the phone. I started to dial the operator, and then I got frightened all over again, Larry. I bolted. I didn't have any plan in mind. I just ran. When I got out on the street I went into that cigar store and phoned you. It was the only thing I could think of to do."

"And the police haven't been notified?"

"No—I didn't call them," Lucia said. She reached out a hand to him. "I suppose my fingerprints are on that gun and on the telephone and . . . and, heaven knows where else. It might be hard to explain."

"Damned hard," said Larry, tight-lipped.

"YOU see, Adrian's people—the girl and that clerk of his—know I was there yesterday and that I quarreled with him about Father's stamps. It might look—look suspicious if I—"

"Where's that catalogue you brought downtown?" Larry asked.

She drew her coat around her as though she were cold. "I—I must have left it on the desk."

Larry stood up and dropped a dollar bill on the table. "Let's go," he said. "We've got to get rid of those fingerprints of yours and recover that catalogue before the police take over."

Lucia seemed to go rigid from head to foot. "I can't go back, Larry! I can't! *I can't!*"

"Hey, take it easy!" he said. He slipped back into his seat across from her. "Maybe it's better if you don't go. Can you remember exactly what you did when you were there?"

"I t-think so," she said, tremulously.

"What did you touch? That's the important thing," Larry told her.

She closed her eyes in an effort at concentration. "Of course there are the doors, Larry—the outside door and the door into the room where he is." Larry nodded. "When I w-walked into that room I—I stood by the door. I thought I was g-going to faint for a moment when I saw him. Then I g-got my nerve back and went over to him. Then I picked up the gun."

"Touch the desk, too?"

"I may have. I don't know for sure. Then I went around to the telephone. I started to dial. Then I—I ran. I m-must have touched the desk on that side." She opened her eyes and looked straight at him. "That's all, Larry. I'm sure that's all."

"And the catalogue is on the desk?"

"Y-yes. I put it down there."

Larry lit a cigarette, his eyes squinted to keep out the smoke. "Now think, Lucia. Did you pass anyone in the building—on the stair, in the hallway?"

"No, I didn't see anyone."

"Another thing. When you telephoned for your appointment did he answer the phone himself, or did you get the receptionist or Louderbach?"

"He answered it himself, Larry."

"Good." He sounded cheerful. "That probably means no one else knew you'd made the appointment. The girl and Louderbach had gone home. You say he told you he had a seven o'clock appointment. He didn't tell you whom it was with?"

He just said he had an appointment," said Lucia.

"Right." Larry took one of her hands in his. "I'm going down there, Lucia, and get rid of the evidence against you. You're going to walk up to the Brooklyn Bridge subway station and take a train uptown. No taxis down here. There's so little business a driver might remember picking you up. You can take a cab from the Grand Central to your apartment. When you get home, have a good stiff drink and then try to get some rest. And if the police question you—"

"Larry!"

"Listen, darling. They're going to talk to Louderbach sooner or later. Unless they get the killer cold, right off the bat, they're going to want to know about everyone who had dealings with Max recently. Louderbach's going to tell them that you

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were there yesterday, and that you had a row with Adrian over your father's collection. They're almost certain to question you then."

"I s-see."

"You admit quite frankly that you were there yesterday—everything about that visit just as it happened. *But you haven't seen him or been there since!* Understand?"

"Yes, Larry."

"If anyone down here spots you—the people in this bar—the place where you had a cocktail—the place where you had dinner—*you were down here to see me!* I stood you up. You were waiting for me to show. Understand?"

"Yes. Oh, Larry, I'm frightened!"

"THERE'S nothing to be afraid of," he said. "You didn't kill him. Without your fingerprints they're not even going to suspect you."

"I don't know how to thank you, Larry," she said. "There's no reason you should run any risks for me, or stand back of me, or—or anything!"

"You're a client," said Larry, brusquely. "Lawrence Storm, Inc. always stands back of its clients." He gave her hand a reassuring pat. "Now I've got to get moving before someone else finds dear Adrian and raises a hue and cry. Go home the way I told you—sit tight—and there'll be nothing to worry about. I'll call you."

He parted with her outside Conley's and walked south on Nassau Street toward the building in which Adrian had his offices. As he passed the bar where Bones had been waiting for Lon Nicholas, he looked in through the plate glass window. There was no sign of Bones, or Lon. Or Ellen. He crossed the street.

The lobby and the stairway were lighted by dim electric bulbs. The whole building was silent. Larry started up, walking as quietly as he could. At the third floor he went along the corridor to the door of Adrian's office, opened it, and stepped in.

"Reach for the ceiling—and fast!" said a voice, in back of him.

Larry turned quickly. Standing behind the door was the broad-shouldered, bull-necked assistant of Inspector Bradley. He was covering Larry with an automatic.

"Reach!" repeated the detective, grimly. As Larry slowly raised his hands Rube called out: "Hey, Red! Look what I got!"

Out of Adrian's private office sauntered the trench-coated figure of Inspector Bradley.

"Mercy!" he said, when he saw Larry. His mild but searching gray eyes surveyed Larry steadily. Then the faintest kind of a smile quirked the corners of his mouth. "I'm wondering," he confided, "whether I ought to act surprised!"

CHAPTER IX

SHALL WE JOIN THE CORPSE?

IF LARRY felt any fear or alarm at the sight of the inspector, it did not show in his face. There was a set look to his jaw, but he was smiling. "May I put down my hands without being plugged by your pal here?" he asked.

"Why, Rube wouldn't hurt a fly," said Bradley. "Would you, Rube?"

"Yeah!" Rube grumbled.

"I think you can safely put away your cannon," said the inspector. His eyes twinkled at Larry. "Mr. Storm and I were both anticipating this meeting."

"Not me," said Larry, lowering his hands. "Don't tell me someone else has been threatening Adrian."

"Oh, mercy, yes," said Bradley. "Worse than threats, I'm afraid. To be brief, he is dead." His gaze remained fixed on Larry's face. "Surprised?"

"Not exactly," said Larry.

"No, no, you wouldn't be. Care to have a look at him?"

"Why not?" said Larry.

Bradley gestured toward the door of the private office with the stem of his pipe, and Larry walked ahead of him into the room. There were several other men there. One of them was busily dusting furniture with gray powder. Another had a camera set

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up in one corner, but he had finished taking pictures and was packing plates away in a black leather case. A third man was evidently a medical examiner.

Max Adrian's body lay in the rug, just as Lucia had described it, the little eyes staring up at the ceiling. Larry looked down for a moment, then his eyes strayed to the desk where Lucia said she had left the gun. It wasn't there any longer. Nor was there any sign of the catalogue she had forgotten.

"Picture of a man stricken with grief as he views the body of a dear friend," said Bradley softly.

Larry turned to him quickly. "We don't have to pretend about that," he said. "You know how I felt about Adrian. He was a louse, Bradley. Nobody's going to burst into tears when they hear about this."

Bradley nodded. "Yes, I have a vague idea, but I'm afraid my information is going to have to be a little more specific." He looked at Larry hopefully. "Unless, of course, you're prepared to confess? You hated him—you killed him—you have, like all murderers, returned to the scene of the crime."

"Do all murderers return to the scene of the crime?" Larry asked.

"Yes," said Bradley—"in books! In real life, they run like hell, Mr. Storm. Except smart ones."

Larry shrugged. "I don't think you're going to have any trouble digging up suspects, Inspector. Enough people hated Adrian's guts to form a nice, sociable little club."

"Let's begin with the charter members," said Bradley. "You, for instance."

"Too obvious," said Larry. "Lon Nicholas and I are much too obvious."

"It's no fun if you're going to produce alibis," Bradley complained. "Lon Nicholas would be your friend who got kicked around this afternoon?"

"Yes," said Larry.

"You wouldn't think I was prying if I were to ask where Nicholas is now, would you?"

"Home," said Larry, his voice hardening.

Bradley fumbled in the pocket of his trench coat for the red tin of tobacco. "Your home?"

"No," said Larry.

Bradley shook his head. "Your readiness to give out information, Storm, is heart-warming." He sighed. "His home?"

"Yes," said Larry.

"Mercy," said Bradley, "we're advancing. And where is his home?"

"I don't know," said Larry. "Lon has been on his uppers for a couple of years. He's been living in rooming houses and I honestly don't know where his present hangout is."

"YOU'LL have to tell me the story of his life sometime," said Bradley. "Soon." He turned to the other men in the room. "Through, boys?" The photographer and the fingerprint man nodded. "Okay then, Doc. You can take little Maxie down to the chopping block and go to work on him. Let's get him out of here so we can have a little elbow room."

He knocked out his pipe in the palm of his hand and dropped the dottle in the pocket of his trench-coat. Then he began methodically to reload the bowl from the little red tin. His eyes roamed with a kind of lazy interest around the room.

Two white-coated men with a stretcher, came in. They lifted Adrian's body onto the stretcher, covered it with a sheet, and carried it out. The fingerprint man, the photographer, and the doctor followed them. Bradley struck a match, an old-fashioned kitchen match, on the heel of his shoe. He let the flame burn down the stick a little way before he held it to the bowl of his pipe.

"About Nicholas," he said gently.

"Lon was a stamp broker," said Larry. "He'd spent most of his life working to raise the capital to go into business. Almost as soon as he'd opened an office, he was cheated out of everything he had by a man who'd built up credit under a phony name. He got most of Lon's valuable stock on approval and then disappeared."

"And the man was Adrian?"

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"Lon thinks so," said Larry.

"And you?"

Larry's lips tightened. "I think so, too."

"Proof?"

"None."

Bradley sucked at his pipe. "It would be nice to talk to Mr. Nicholas," he said. "I hope he isn't going to be difficult about it. By the by," he added casually, "have we you to thank for notifying us about this little tea party?"

"You mean you don't know who notified you about the murder?" said Larry.

"Our informant was terribly, terribly reticent and shy," said Bradley. "He wouldn't give his name. Just said he thought we'd be interested to know that Adrian was lying dead in his office . . . and hung up!"

"Maybe it was the murderer himself." Larry kept his voice quite steady. "The fingerprints on the gun should help."

Bradley's eyes wandered thoughtfully around the room and then came back to Larry's face again. "What gun?" he asked.

Larry opened his mouth and then closed it with a snap.

"What gun?" repeated Bradley.

"Why—I assumed you had the gun," Larry said.

"Is it your experience, Mr. Storm, that murderers leave their guns behind them with a convenient set of fingerprints for our benefit?"

"Stupid of me," said Larry.

"Maybe," said Bradley, puffing at his pipe. "By the way, why are you here?"

"I came to see Adrian on business," said Larry.

"What busienss?"

Larry reached into his pocket for his cigarette case. The palms of his hands were slightly damp. "Stamps," he said. "Mr. Adrian and I are both stamp brokers."

Bradley nodded. "You know, that's been bothering me since this afternoon. You can't run an establishment like this on hay."

"Adrian probably turned over several hundred thousand dollars' worth of stock a year," Larry said.

"I thought stamp collecting was mostly a kid busines," Bradley said.

"You'll probably learn a lot about stamps before you're through with this case, Inspector," said Larry.

"Yes . . . yes, I haven't a doubt of it," said Bradley. "Fascinating work, being a detective. Meet such a lot of interesting people. Gather so many interesting facts. Did you have an appointment with Adrian tonight?"

"No," Larry said, promptly. "But he often worked late at his office. I just took a chance that he'd be here."

"And he was," said Bradley mournfully. "Oh, yes, he was here. Tell me about him."

"Mind if I sit down," Larry asked, pointing to the edge of the desk, "or will I be destroying evidence?"

"Not at all," said Bradley. "We've gotten all the fingerprints there were in the place. Make yourself comfortable. About Adrian?"

"A RAT," said Larry. "A first-class unvarnished rat. This office is a stamp bucket shop, a sucker trap. Adrian dealt in phonies, cripples, and stolen goods. He . . ."

"Come again," said Bradley. "Phonies? Cripples?"

"Stamps that weren't authentic." Larry grinned at him. "Stamps that had been repaired so that they looked to be in mint condition."

"Mercy!" said Bradley. "You'll have to prepare a glossary for me."

"From your point of view, all you need to know is that he cheated his clients out of thousands of dollars each year. Maybe somebody caught him at it."

"And murdered him over a stamp!" Bradley shook his head.

"Stamps represent money . . . plenty of money, Inspector. Money is always a good motive for murder, isn't it?"

"Motive number one," Bradley conceded. "Go on."

Larry shrugged. "There isn't any more," he said. "Adrian was a crook. Somebody didn't like it."

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"Oh, definitely not," said Bradley. He seemed to lose interest in Larry for the moment. He began to saunter around the room, his hands sunk in his pockets. Finally he came to a halt in front of Adrian's safe. Larry noticed that the big, outer door with its chromium-plated wheels and dials was standing open.

"Take a look at this," said Bradley. Larry went over to join him. "Those keys," Bradley pointed to a heavily loaded key ring. One of the keys was inserted in the lock of the inner door. A gold chain dangled from the ring. "Those are Adrian's keys," the inspector said. "One of the belt loops on his pants was ripped loose. It looks as though somebody took the keys out of his pocket after he was dead, couldn't unsnap the chain, and tore it free. Fingers might be a little clumsy just after a killing. Suggest anything to you?"

"Robbery, of course."

"But there's nothing but books in there," said Bradley. He swung open the safe door.

"Books containing thousands of dollars' worth of stamps," said Larry. His eyes narrowed. "And there are some missing!"

"How do you know?" Bradley asked.

"I've seen the inside of this safe before."

The inspector sighed. "You have an answer for everything, haven't you, Mr. Storm? I guess," he added, "there's no use asking you again to break down and admit that you killed him."

"Not the slightest." Larry grinned at the detective.

Bradley walked away from the safe, chin sunk forward on his chest, to the door of the Inspection Room. "Could these be the missing books?" he asked.

Larry followed him to the doorway. The lights were burning brightly in the buyer's sanctum. On a little wheel-table beside a big arm chair was a pile of leatherbound stock books. The top one lay open. Larry went to the table. He looked down at the open book, and his lips pursed in a low whistle.

"This is *stuff!*" he said. Bradley came to peer over his shoulder. "British Guiana issues," Larry explained, a faint note of excitement creeping into his voice. He reached down with skilled fingers and took one of the stamps out of its slot. It was a blue stamp with the picture of a sailing ship on it. "This is an 1856 Number 15," he said. "See? They were initialed by the postmasters before being issued."

"Fascinating," said Bradley, dryly.

"It's worth about four thousand bucks," said Larry. "And this one! I've been hunting for one of these all over town." He replaced the first stamp and took out a second. "This is the Number 16, Inspector. Looks just the same, doesn't it? A blue, four-cent stamp. Same sailing ship. Initials scrawled across the front. But this one is worth two thousand more than the other. See why?"

"I don't see why it's worth more than four cents!" muttered Bradley.

Larry laughed. "Your collector will pay six thousand for this one, Inspector, because the dye came through the back side. Incidentally, the one-cent stamp of this same issue—it's magenta—is the most valuable stamp in the world. There's only one known to be in existence. It was offered for sale the other day for thirty-seven thousand five hundred."

"MERCY!" said Bradley. He was looking at the stamp Larry still held between his fingers. "Writing on the back of it, too," he observed. When Larry didn't answer the inspector glanced up at him. The expression of enthusiasm had left Larry's face, and it was suddenly set in grim lines. "What's it mean?" Bradley asked. "Looks like the letters 'OLHH'. Postmaster again?"

"No," said Larry, slowly. "Those letters are written in indelible pencil, as you see." His voice was unnaturally taut. "That's what they call a broker's code, Inspector. We usually have a code—some ten-letter word with all the letters different. The letters represent the nine digits and the zero. We sometimes pencil in the amount we've paid for the stamp or the

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amount we have to get for it to make a profit. Thus, when we're talking to a customer we know just how much we have to ask him for the stamp, simply by looking at the code price on the back."

"I see," said Bradley, vaguely.

"For example," said Larry, "if my code word were 'Republican', which it isn't . . ."

"God forbid," drawled Bradley.

"If it were," said Larry, "and I had to get say $5800 for this stamp I might pencil on the back of it 'BCNN'. Get the idea?"

"Yes," said Bradley. "What was Adrian's code word?"

Larry chuckled. "He wouldn't tell his own mother that! Neither would I. Even his employees won't be able to tell you."

"But you think those letters 'OLHH' represent Adrian's price on that stamp?"

"They may," said Larry. He was not looking at the inspector. Bradley was silent for a moment.

"One thing's certain," he said. "The murderer wasn't interested in wholesale robbery if he left all this stuff lying around loose. Maybe he was after one particular stamp . . . one of those expensive ones."

"Adrian's clerk should be able to tell you if anything of real value is missing," Larry said.

"I know," Bradley murmured. "We've sent for Mr. Louderbach. He should be here soon."

Larry replaced the Number 16 in the stock book. He turned to the detective. "Now that you've had the benefit of my knowledge about Adrian and the stamp business in general, is there any reason why I shouldn't go along home, Inspector?"

Bradley's eyebrows went up in an expression of surprise. "You don't expect me to turn loose a perfectly good suspect, do you, Mr. Storm?"

Larry smiled, but there was a kind of stiffness at the corner of his mouth. "*Am* I a suspect, Inspector?"

"Mercy, yes!" said Bradley. "Besides," he added, "I shall probably need your help. There's evidently a heap of information about stamps and the nuts who deal in them and collect them that I should have. And you seem to be an expert."

"I'm glad to help, Inspector," said Larry, "but—" He hesitated.

"But what?" asked Bradley, innocently.

"I ought to make a couple of phone calls," said Larry.

"Why not?" said Bradley. "Use the phone in the other room. Or won't that be private enough, Mr. Storm?"

Larry relaxed. His smile was quite natural. "Being a policeman has given you a nasty, suspicious mind, Bradley." He started toward the desk in the main office. Before he reached it the voice of Rube came to them.

"Hey, Red! We've got another caller."

"Bring him in," said Bradley, cheerfully. Both he and Larry stood facing the door. At the sight of Rube's prisoner Larry groaned audibly. Bradley glanced at him.

"Know the lady, Storm?" he asked.

"Sure I know her!" Larry said, angrily. "She's my secretary!"

Bradley looked with mild interest at Ellen who stood in the doorway with Rube's big paw on her shoulder. "You don't seem to work union hours, Miss—er—"

"Dixon," said Ellen, in a cool voice.

"'Man may work from sun to sun, but woman's work is never done,'" Larry said.

CHAPTER X

LITTLE BITS OF PAPER

"OKAY, Rube, I think I can handle these two by myself," said Bradley, his eyes twinkling. "Go back to your post and see if we catch anything more in your net." Rube went away. Bradley looked from Ellen to Larry, questioningly. "Are there any more?"

"More?" Ellen said.

"I thought maybe you had been planning some kind of a surprise party for Mr. Adrian. I was wondering if we could expect any more guests?"

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"The inspector's sense of humor," Larry explained.

"Sorry," Bradley sighed. "You'd better come in and make yourself comfortable, Miss Dixon." He watched Ellen as she came into the room, sat down in one of the chairs near the desk, and cheerfully adjusted her skirt and top coat. "Don't you wonder why I'm here?" Bradley asked her.

"Very much," said Ellen crisply.

Bradley looked at Larry. "Think she can stand the shock?" he asked. "Yeah. Tell her."

"Adrian's been murdered, Ellen," Larry said, "Shot. Someone notified the police. At the moment I seem to be under suspicion."

"When was he killed?" Ellen asked.

"Medical evidence is so vague," said Bradley.

"I don't know whether this provides Mr. Storm with an alibi or not," she said, "but I'll give it to you for what it's worth. He got back to his apartment at about seven this evening. I was there. I—"

"Please!" Bradley held up a hand. "I appreciate all this, Miss Dixon. But I'm baffled. No one around here seems to bat an eyelish when they hear Adrian is dead. No one asks, 'Who did it?' There seems to be an extraordinary lack of curiosity. No susceptibility to shock. It's very distressing."

"Obviously, if you suspect Larry, you don't *know* who did it!" Ellen said. "And I'm not shocked. Not even surprised."

Bradley shook his head. "The young women I know don't take murder so lightly."

"I'm not surprised," said Ellen, "because I knew it was going to happen."

Bradley gave Larry a look of hope. "Now we're getting places. In that case, Miss Dixon, you must have known who was going to do it?"

"Any one of about fifty people," said Ellen. "I haven't any idea which one of them finally got up the courage."

Bradley closed his eyes tight. "Let's not follow these leads unless we have to," he pleaded. "Let me cling to Mr. Storm as my suspect for awhile. But you were about to ruin that by providing him with an alibi. Go ahead."

Ellen glanced at Larry. "He came home about seven. I was there. I had supper waiting for him. At about a quarter to eight we came downtown in a taxi together. Larry wanted to see Mr. Adrian and I went to the office to get some information from the files. I was to join him here."

Bradley said nothing. He just looked at her. The expression of her face did not change nor did the color in her cheeks. The inspector sighed. "Maybe you're telling the truth," he said, "in part." He began to make another aimless tour of the room. Presently he stepped through the door into the outer office.

"You would walk right into this," Larry said, in a sharp whisper.

"You too," Ellen said. She glanced toward the door. "Larry—about Bones!"

Larry interrupted her. "The walls have ears," he said. "This guy is smart. Had me on thin ice a couple of times."

Bradley came through the door again. He was carrying a narrow-necked bottle in his hand.

"Ever see a bottle with a tree in it before?" he asked. He held it up. Inside the bottle was what looked like a small branch, heavily coated with crystalized sugar.

"It's an Italian liqueur called *Fiore di Alpa,*" said Larry.

"Any good?" Bradley asked.

"Too sweet for my taste," said Larry.

Bradley turned the bottle over and over in his hands. "You two disappoint me," he said. "You don't react."

"What am I supposed to do, ask for a drink?" Larry said.

The inspector shook his head. "You're supposed to turn pale and moisten dry lips," he said. "This damned thing was just thrown in to make it tough." He frowned at the bottle. Then he held it up again to the light. "See that stain on the bottom? It's blood—and there are several hairs sticking to it. And out there in the waiting room, near the desk, is a little

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pool of blood on the floor. Somebody was slugged with this bottle, fell down on the floor, and bled. Tonight!" he added, in a pained voice. He glanced at Ellen and Larry, but their faces were blank. "Now no one slugged Adrian, and apparently no one slugged either of you, though I haven't looked under Miss Dixon's hat!"

"You may," said Ellen.

"Your color's too good," said Bradley.

"Where did you find the bottle?" Larry asked.

"On the receptionist's desk," said Bradley.

Larry grinned. "If you hadn't told me Adrian was unmarked, I'd have said the receptionist crowned him. He had wandering hands."

Bradley sighed. "Not a nice guy, this Adrian. I wish it were as simple as that."

At that moment Rube called out from the other room. "Hey, Red! Here's Mike with that clerk."

Mr. Louderbach, pale as a ghost, his eyes looking enormous behind the thick lenses of his spectacles, came into the room. When he saw Larry, Mr. Louderbach stopped, a shaking hand raised to his lips. "So it was you!" he said.

"Oh, my God," Larry groaned. "This is where I came in!"

LOUDERBACH was escorted to a chair. He sat down. He took off his spectacles to wipe them and his eyes immediately turned red and began to water. He crossed and uncrossed his legs. He looked about as if he expected to see Adrian's body lying in some corner beyond his limited range of vision.

Bradley, unhurried, soothing, waited for Louderbach to get himself quite comfortable. Larry had taken up his perch on the edge of the big desk again, and Ellen sat in her chair, her grave eyes fixed on Louderbach.

Then Louderbach began to give. He told of his horror when the plainclothesman had arrived at his room with news of Mr. Adrian's death. He spoke of his heart, which was none too strong, and expressed wonder that he had gotten down town at all. A "cardiac condition," he called it. Bradley made sympathetic, clucking noises and waited.

Then Louderbach fixed his magnified pupils on Larry in much the same expression that they might have held if he had been looking at a three-headed baby in a pickle jar. Louderbach obviously was horrified, but at the same time he was fascinated.

He was not surprised that Mr. Storm had killed Mr. Adrian. Theirs had not been an "amicable relationship." Only that afternoon Mr. Storm had threatened Mr. Adrian after accusing him of dishonesty in the auctioning of a collection belonging to a certain Miss Warren. The truth of the matter was that Mr. Storm himself had cheated Miss Warren and was endeavoring to place the blame on Mr. Adrian.

"I know that for a fact," said Louderbach, "because I personally examined the collection before it was auctioned. I was astonished that a collector of the late Colonel Warren's acumen had so many inferior items."

"That was after Adrian had had a chance to do a job on it," said Larry.

Bradley's eyes moved lazily to Larry's face and then shifted to Ellen's.

"Mr. Storm doesn't have to defend his professional reputation, Inspector," she said.

Mr. Louderbach glared at Ellen.

"How do you like Mr. Nicholas as a potential murderer?" Bradley invited.

"I doubt whether he would have had the courage to return so soon," said Louderbach. "He must have known Mr. Adrian would be prepared for him."

"But he had a motive, a strong motive," said Bradley

"He's an incompetent hysteric," said Louderbach. "Any criminal psychologist could tell you—"

"Please, Mr. Louderbach," said Bradley, "please! Let's leave criminal psychology to the criminal psychologists. We'll deal with facts. This Miss Warren. Did she think Mr. Adrian had cheated her?"

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"I regret to say that she did," said Louderbach.

"And he had," Larry added.

"Now, now, Storm," murmured Bradley. "This is Mr. Louderbach's big moment." And then from the pocket of his coat the inspector produced a small printed leaflet. "Ever see this?" he asked Louderbach.

Louderbach adjusted his spectacles. "That is the catalogue of the Warren collection that was used at the auction," he said.

"I see a lot of figures penciled in," said Bradley. "I suppose those are the prices the stamps brought at the sale. Was this, by any chance, Mr. Adrian's property?"

Louderbach shook his head vigorously. "That's Miss Warren's copy," he said. "I saw it when she came here yesterday."

"Did she leave it here then?" Bradley asked, casually.

Mr. Louderbach couldn't say. He had been in the inspection room when "Miss Warren took her departure."

"I found it on Mr. Adrian's desk tonight," Bradley said.

Louderbach's eyes widened. "Mr. Storm must have brought it!" he announced. "They were probably quarreling over it when—when—"

"Were you, Mr. Storm?" Bradley asked, softly.

"I never saw that catalogue before in my life," said Larry.

"You weren't on your way back to get it when we—er—met?" Bradley asked, vaguely hopeful.

"I was not."

BRADLEY sighed. "I was afraid you'd say that," he muttered. He turned to Louderbach. "Mr. Adrian had other quarrels besides the one with Mr. Storm, didn't he?"

"Mr. Adrian was a shrewd business man," said Louderbach.

"He must have been," said Bradley, looking around the office. "Who did he quarrel with?"

"I shouldn't care to say. I shouldn't like to risk incriminating an innocent person."

"My pal!" said Larry.

"Naturally," said Bradley, ignoring Larry. "But you must, Mr. Louderbach, you must!"

Louderbach squirmed. He seemed more than satisfied with the idea that Larry was guilty.

"How about Howard Stevens?" Larry asked.

Mr. Louderbach squirmed some more. "A regrettable incident," he admitted.

Larry laughed. "This Stevens had a collection he'd paid about seventeen thousand dollars for," he told Bradley. "There were uncancelled stamps in it worth at least a thousand dollars face value. I mean they could still have been used for postage! Adrian gave Mr. Stevens six hundred dollars for the lot. It was the prize rooking of all time."

"Mr. Stevens was not obliged to accept the offer," said Louderbach, stiffly.

"But Adrian made him believe that that was the salvage value of his collection," said Larry. "However, Stevens hasn't been here tonight," he added.

"How do you know?" Bradley asked, sharply.

"Because there's no sign of anyone's having been sick around the place." Larry grinned.

"Explanation, please?" said Bradley.

"When you meet Stevens you'll understand," said Larry.

Bradley tamped down the tobacco in his pipe and stared sadly at Mr. Louderbach. He seemed to be lost in thought.

Ellen was looking down at the silver fastening to her trim black hand-bag when she said one word. "Luckman!"

"Yes, Louderbach," said Larry, leaning forward, "how about Luckman?"

Louderbach squirmed more than ever. "You really can't blame Mr. Adrian for that. Any dealer would have done the same thing."

"Tell the inspector about it," said Larry. He gave Ellen an approving smile.

"Well," Louderbach said, "Mr. Luck-

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man had a standing order with Mr. Adrian for a Newfoundland Number 10. It's the 1860 one-shilling orange stamp on laid paper, Inspector, and it doesn't appear on the market very often. Mr. Luckman is a specialist in Newfoundlands, and I believe this was the one stamp he required to make his collection complete."

"Mercy!" said Bradley.

"Well," said Louderbach, "Mr. Luckman had agreed to go as high as twenty-five hundred dollars for it if Mr. Adrian should ever discover one. Mr. Adrian knew that was all Mr. Luckman could afford to pay."

"That's about five hundred dollars more than the actual value of the stamp," Larry put in.

Mr. Louderbach moistened his lips. "That's true," he agreed. "Well, Mr. Adrian obtained the stamp. He was about to notify Mr. Luckman when he received another offer for it—and offer of thirty-five hundred!" Mr. Louderbach shrugged. "Naturally Mr. Adrian sold it to the higher bidder."

"Mr. Luckman didn't like that," asked Bradley.

"He was considerably vexed," admitted Louderbach.

"But who made such a cockeyed offer?" Larry asked.

Mr. Louderbach squared his shoulders. "Mr. Jasper Hale!" he said.

Larry stared an expression of amazement on his face and Ellen looked up in surprise.

"Will someone let me in on this?" Bradley asked.

"Hale is probably the biggest collector in New York. And one of the shrewdest. He doesn't make cockeyed offers. And doesn't collect Newfoundlands," Larry almost shouted.

"The offer was made and the money paid by Mr. Hale's secretary, Paul Gregory," said Louderbach, primly. "If you doubt my word, you can check with him."

Ellen and Larry exchanged glances.

"Furthermore," said Louderbach, "I have just remembered that Mr. Adrian had an appointment with Mr. Gregory tonight—at seven o'clock. Mr. Gregory may have been the last person to see Mr. Adrian alive!"

Nobody spoke for a minute. Then Bradley closed his eyes.

"I've got a headache," he said, surprisingly. "I'm going to take a couple of aspirin and sleep on this. People don't commit murder over little pieces of colored paper. It's foolish." He looked around at all of them. "Go home!" he said.

No one moved.

"Go home!" he repeated, bitterly. "But don't try leaving town. I'll want to see all of you in the morning."

Larry needed no further urging. He slid down off the desk and said to Ellen: "Let's get moving."

"Leave your addresses and telephone numbers with Rube," said Bradley. As they hurried out of the office he stood in the center of the room, his feet spread apart, tapping the stem of his pipe against his teeth. He was smiling.

CHAPTER XI

COPS ON HIS COATTAILS

ONCE she and Larry were in a cab together, Ellen's composure deserted her. She clung to his arm. "Oh, Larry, I'm frightened—terribly frightened."

"My sweet idiot," said Larry, "he can't pin anything on us. We didn't do it."

"I'm not worried about us, Larry. It's Bones! The man at the saloon hasn't seen him or Lon since he telephoned me about six-thirty. It's nearly ten now. The kid hasn't been to his own home. He hasn't telephoned the apartment, according to the man on the switchboard. He hasn't been to the office."

"Bones can take care of himself."

But Ellen wasn't satisfied. "Larry, you know Lon is a little cracked. If he did it—and Bones caught him at it. Well, he might try to keep Bones quiet, mightn't he? Larry—it's not a nice idea."

Larry looked at her. "Lon was right, Ellen," he said, gravely. "He was right—

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and I was right. Adrian was Rivero."

"Larry! You mean you have proof?"

He nodded. "Someone had taken some of the stock books out of Adrian's safe. Bradley thinks it was done after the murder. They were piled up on the table in the inspection room. The top book was open and I took a look. There was a British Guiana Number 16—the four-cent blue that the dye colored through. Remember?" She nodded. "Ellen, Lon's code was penciled on the back of it! His code ward was 'Hieroglyph'. The letters 'OLHH' were on the back of that stamp. Fifty-seven hundred dollars. I remember distinctly that was one of the stolen items and that Lon had priced it as $5700. There's no doubt about it."

"Then it *must* have been Lon, Larry. And Bones! Do you think he'd—do you think he'd hurt Bones?"

Larry covered her hands with his, reassuringly, but there was no note of assurance in his voice. "The whole setup is screwy," he said. "Lucia said there was a gun on the desk when she found Adrian. It wasn't there when Bradley arrived. I'm sure of that. I fell into that up to my neck by saying something about the gun—and he apparently had never found it. And they don't know who reported the killing, Ellen. Someone called up but wouldn't give any name. If it was Lon, why would he notify them? He'd want all the time he could get to scram. The body wouldn't have been found till morning unless someone had told the cops."

"Larry! About Bones—"

"There's nothing we can do but sit tight," he said. "I don't think Lon would hurt Bones; but if Bones has something on him, Lon might hang onto the kid till he had gotten clean away. You'd better go back to the apartment and wait there. Bones *might* contact!"

"But where are you going, Larry?"

"I've got to see Lucia."

"Of course," said Ellen dryly. "What could I have been thinking of?"

"Now, for Pete's sake, Ellen, don't be that way!" he said. "Lucia's in a spot. They have her fingerprints from the phone. Louderbach's given them a lead in her direction. She's got to be warned."

"Right," said Ellen. "I'm sorry. A man needs relaxation after a hard day of this sort. Since a good detective story would probably seem a little pale, what could be better than a Grade A glamour girl? Why think of Bones? After all, he has so little sex."

"Ellen! Holy jumping—! Driver, stop!" Larry yanked open the door as the taxi pulled up to the curb. "What am I supposed to do?" he demanded. "Walk the streets whistling for Bones? Find his footprints on the cement paving? If Lon's got him, there isn't too much to worry about. If he hasn't, Bones will turn up. But Lucia is sure to have the cops on her neck, and if she isn't tipped off she'll say the wrong answers."

"Is the telephone service of the city out of commission?" Ellen asked calmly.

"Goodbye!" Larry snapped. He slammed the cab door shut. "Take this *lady*," he told the driver, "to 7 Gramercy Park, East!"

LARRY hailed another taxi and drove to Lucia's apartment in the East Sixties. The man on duty in the lobby announced him over a switchboard phone and received prompt instructions to show him upstairs. Lucia herself was waiting at the front door for him. She was wearing a trailing tea gown of heavy white crêpe. Its expensive simplicity seemed to heighten her beauty.

"Is everything all right, Larry?" she asked.

"Everything is lousy!" he said. He looked around the living room. The furniture looked a little unsubstantial, except for a comfortable lounge near the fireplace. Larry made for this.

"You're tired." Lucia said. "Let me get you a drink. Scotch—brandy?"

"You're an angel," he said. "Scotch—plain water." He lit a cigarette and stretched his legs out in front of him as she disappeared into a kitchenette.

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Presently she returned and handed him a tall glass.

"Now tell me," she said, sitting on the couch beside him.

"The cops were there when I arrived!" he said.

Her eyes widened. "Larry! Then you weren't able to—"

"They've got your fingerprints all right," he said. "But Lucia, there wasn't any gun. Are you sure you saw and touched a gun?"

"Larry. Why should I say there was one if there wasn't?"

"God knows," he said, glumly. "The whole thing's a mess. Briefly he told her what had happened at Adrian's office.

"Maybe your Mr. Bradley did find the gun and was just trying to get you to commit yourself," Lucia suggested.

"I don't think so," said Larry. "You didn't go into the inspection room off the office, did you?"

"No, Larry."

"Then Bradley's right about the safe being opened *after* Adrian was murdered, the murderer may have been in the next room when you arrived."

"Then he would have seen me!" Lucia cried, her face white.

"He would but I wouldn't worry about that. He can't very well do any talking without incriminating himself. The point is: he may have put the gun down on the desk while he was fussing with the safe, and then, after you'd gone, he made tracks—taking the gun with him. In a way it's a break for you, because your prints on the gun would have been bad news."

"Will this Bradley come here to see me?"

"Sooner or later," said Larry, "and you've got to have a pat story for him. He knows about your first visit to Adrian from Louderbach, but fortunately Louderbach couldn't remember whether you'd left the catalogue there at that time or not. Your story has to be that you did. That you haven't seen Adrian since."

"But if they have my prints on the phone, Larry?"

"They have a set of prints, all right. But how do they know they're yours? They can't just walk in here and fingerprint you for the fun of it. They haven't got anything on you. All you have to do is sit tight, stick to the story that you haven't been there since yesterday, and let Bradley do the worrying."

"But Larry, if—" She was interrupted by the doorbell.

"Expecting someone?" Larry asked.

"It must be the hall boy," she said. "They don't bring anyone upstairs without telephoning."

"I'll get it," Larry said. He rose from the couch and went into the hall, his highball glass still in his hand. He opened the door.

"Well, well, well," drawled Inspector Bradley. "Fancy finding you here, Storm. Mind if I come in?"

HE didn't wait for a reply, but moved past Larry into the room. When he saw Lucia he took off his hat, uncovering his close-cropped, red hair.

"Miss Warren? I'm Inspector Bradley. I'm sure you've heard about me by now. Sorry to call at this time of night, but as a matter of fact I knew you were receiving."

Lucia was standing with her back to the fire, her hands clenched at her sides, looking tense and frightened.

"How did you know I was here?" Larry asked.

"When I write my memoirs," said Bradley, "I shall elaborate on the deductive methods I used in arriving at the certainty that you'd be calling on Miss Warren." He began unbelting his coat. "But the plain truth is, Storm, I had you followed."

"Why?" Larry asked.

Bradley slipped off his coat and put it on a chair. He looked at Larry, lazily amused. "You seemed to be so full of ideas down at Adrian's office, and you simply wouldn't share them with me!" He shrugged. "I thought if I hung onto your coattails, I might get taken interesting places." He looked around the apartment.

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"This doesn't look like the kind of a room where a man ought to smoke a pipe, Miss Warren, but I'd be a lot happier if you wouldn't object."

"Please do," Lucia said. "Won't you have a drink?"

"It's against the rules," said Bradley, fumbling for his pipe. "Yes, I will."

He filled his pipe from the red can, strolled over to the fireplace, struck a match on one of the inside bricks, and held it to the bowl. Lucia came back from the kitchenette with another highball.

Bradley took the glass from Lucia, raised it to her in a little salute, and sipped. "I wish this visit weren't professional," he sighed. "A well-seasoned pipe, a mellow drink—"

"You're forgetting a good book," said Larry.

"As a matter of fact I wasn't," said Bradley. "It was a book really brought me here. A catalogue—a catalogue belonging to you, Miss Warren."

"Miss Warren left that catalogue at Adrian's yesterday," Larry said. "She was just telling me about it."

Bradley shook his head dolefully. "It's amazing, Storm, how reticent you are about answering questions directed at you, and how quickly you leap into the breach to answer questions I ask someone else."

"See here, Bradley," Larry said. "It's no use grilling Miss Warren. Adrian's death is a bad break for her. Adrian had cheated her out of about a hundred and fifty thousand dollars. Alive, there was a chance of getting restitution. Dead, she's out of luck. She's the last person in the world to have wanted anything to happen to Adrian."

"I see," Bradley murmured. "But to get restitution, she'd have had to prove the crime. Could she?"

"I think so," said Larry. "I was acting for her. It was about that I went to see Adrian tonight. And that's why I came here as soon as you turned me loose. I wanted her to know what had happened."

"Was she as surprised as you were that Adrian was dead?"

"I was horrified!" Lucia said. "It's a terrible thing!"

"Well, now, I'm glad to hear that," said Bradley. "Up to now no one seems to have reacted to this murder at all. It's comforting to find someone who's upset." He reached into his pocket and took out a small, gold compact. "Ever see this before?" he asked Lucia, abruptly, holding it out to her.

"Lucia!" Larry stepped toward her, but she had already taken the compact and was turning it over in her fingers. Bradley glanced at Larry, a faint smile at the corner of his mouth.

"I never saw it before," said Lucia. She handed the compact back to Bradley.

"I didn't think you had," Bradley said sadly. He handled the compact gingerly, his fingers only touching the outside rim.

HE slipped it into his pocket. Then he took a swallow of his drink, got his pipe drawing nicely, and began to rock contentedly back and forth on his heels. He didn't say anything. He just studied the other two with his mild gray eyes.

Finally Lucia said: "Have you any—any clues, Inspector?"

Bradley made a wry face. "Nothing much. Only disturbing things — only mixed-up things. Of course I have Mr. Storm," he looked thoughtfully at Larry. "Why can't you and I be pals?" he said.

"Is it customary for the police to be chummy with suspects?" Larry asked.

"If it'll do 'em any good." Bradley grinned.

Then the telephone rang, and Lucia answered it. "For you," she said to Larry.

Bradley's grin broadened as he watched Larry go to the phone. Larry looked stiff and uncomfortable.

"Hello."

"I hate to break up a tête-á-tête," said Ellen's calm voice. "But I thought you'd like to know that Lon Nicholas is here!"

Larry eyed Bradley. "Oh, thanks very much," he said, airily.

"Larry! Did you hear what I said?"

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Ellen demanded. "Lon's here. He was asleep outside your apartment door when I got back—boiled to the ears."

Larry's fingers were gripping the telephone tightly, but his voice was extremely casual.

"Is that so!"

"Larry, what's the matter with you? Is there someone there besides Lucia?"

"Yes."

"Cops?"

"Yes?"

"Bradley?"

"Yes."

"Has he arrested Lucia?"

"Don't be a fool!""

"About Lon. I got some black coffee down him. He swears he hasn't been anywhere near Adrian, and he swears he hasn't seen anything of Bones since he locked him in the bathroom. Something's happened to Bones, Larry."

"I hope not," said Larry. Bradley's stare was becoming unpleasantly inquisitive.

"Will you please come home soon so that you can make some sense?" Ellen demanded.

"Yes, of course," said Larry. "Be seeing you."

He hung up the receiver. He took a handkerchief from his pocket and patted his lips with it. Nobody spoke. At last Bradley sighed.

"I don't suppose either one of you would like to break down and talk?" He looked hopefully at them.

"You've heard all there is," said Larry. "There isn't any more. I told you all I knew down at Adrian's. Miss Warren doesn't know anything at all about it."

"I was afraid of that," said Bradley. He drained his glass, put it down on the table, and went over to the chair where he'd left his coat. "I'm on my way to see a guy named Paul Gregory," he said to Larry. "I'd appreciate it if you'd come along, Storm. You might help me think up some bright questions to ask him about stamps."

"I'll come," said Larry, quickly. He turned to Lucia. "I'm sorry the way things have turned out." His tone was very formal. "I'm afraid Adrian's death rather puts an end to your chance of bringing an action against him."

"Oh, definitely," murmured Bradley.

"Thank you for your effort anyway," said Lucia. She spoke calmly enough, but her eyes were pleading with Larry.

"I'll phone if anything turns up," he said. He got his own coat and hat and he and Bradley went out together.

While they were waiting for the elevator Bradley knocked out his pipe against his heel and felt for the red tobacco tin again.

"You know, Storm, I ought to slap you in jail and to hell with you," he said, quietly.

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT WEEK

DON'T MISS

WILD RIVER

by John Stromberg

One of the great novels of our time—the powerful story of Boulder Dam and its builders

Coming in the ARGOSY for May 20th

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They would only let him peep at her through the devil screen, but still she seemed to smile

Steal No Man's Shadow

By WALTER C. BROWN

Author of "Beachcomber"

How the wooing of the Maiden with Nine Fathers was complicated by an old gamester's gluttony, and resolved—with Oriental finesse—to the tune of "Speed the Parting Guest"

THIS is a tale that is whispered in Chinatown, and to savor its full flavor one should hear it, as I did, from the lips of Gow Yat, who is something of a character in his own right.

If you will buy Gow Yat a drink of the pale white whiskey that is sold in Long Sword Alley he will tell you of his gruesome profession in the old days—how he boiled the flesh from the bodies of dead Chinese, so that their bones might be packed into silver-plated boxes and sent for burial in the sacred soil of Han.

And if you are skeptical, Gow Yat, for a modest fee, will take you to a certain dark cellar in Half-Moon Street and show you the enormous iron pot which he used for the purpose. But if you know Gow's true quality, you will purchase a stone bottle of the liquor called *samshu,* place it before him, and wait patiently. After the third or fourth drink you will be rewarded with a story as Oriental as a jade carving—such as this tale of how Wang Hop's shadow was stolen.

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Now the yellow man does not like the sound of an unpleasant word, for one never knows when the *feng-shui* are listening, and he will not say that such-and-such a person was murdered—but that "his shadow was stolen."

"This is a story that will be told by our sons' sons, aye, and beyond," Gow Yat explained. "It is a tale filled with the honorable sentiment of love, and it is written that love has as many faces as the race of men. We will see how the youth Wang Kai looked upon the beautiful Ming Yan and was smitten with the marriage-love. There will also be talk of Hugh Lee, who held the great friend-love for young Wang; and of Wang's wicked uncle, Wang Hop, who being an old man and fat, had only belly-love for rich and tasty foods."

Now Ming Yan's name must be spoken guardedly, for there is a Law of the Rice-face making, and the manner of her arrival from far-off, war-torn China is a thing to be passed over in silence. Ming Yan was the daughter of a wealthy *taipan,* and had lived in a great *yamen.* Then war came, such war as had never been seen in the Land of the Dragon, and an "iron egg" from one of the silver-winged sky-wagons had buried her family, home and fortune in smoking ruin.

By and by the sorrowful news drifted across the blue sea to an old man in the Rice-face land, who was now the girl's only living relative, and his heart was moved to pity. "I will send for this helpless little *tai yan,*" he said. "I will pay for her passage into this land of peace where iron eggs do not fall from the skies and kill. Before many moons have passed she will learn to laugh and sing again."

It is said that he was obliged to pay out thrice the girl's weight in silver dollars to make the necessary arrangements for Ming Yan's secret journey over the sea. However that may be, in the long weeks of waiting that followed, it chanced that the old Chinaman fell sick and died.

"*Aiee!* This is a sorrow with a double shadow!" they said. "Now there will be none to give welcome to the sad maiden from our unhappy land."

"Not so!" came the reply. "The Council of Elders of the Tsin Tien Tong will draw upon their wisdom to do what is needful. The girl shall lack neither rice nor kind words. Indeed, now she will have nine fathers, instead of but one."

SO ALL Chinatown waited with bated breath, fixing meantime its slant eyes on the coming and going of Sergeant O'Hara and his Men with the Hard Sticks. Red paper prayers were burned in profusion, and perfumed incense drifted thickly in the Plum Blossom Joss House, so that the eyes of the watchful White Devils might be turned the other way when the girl arrived.

Came then a certain night without moon or stars, and silent-footed figures moved stealthily along the waterfront. Word ran through the crooked streets of Chinatown like the whisper of green leaves stirring in the wind. "She has come! She is here! The beautiful *tai yan* is safe!"

Young Wang Kai heard the details from Moy Sing the silk merchant as they stood together scanning the war bulletins which were posted every day on the walls of the tea-house.

"I have seen her face!" the silk merchant boasted. "For one silver dollar the toothless old *mafoo* at the Tong House let me peep for a moment from behind a devil-screen. *Hai!* But she is a delight to the eye! I think the *mafoo* will grow rich within the space of a week!"

At these words something stirred within young Wang, so that he was moved to go likewise and cross the *mafoo's* wrinkled palm with silver. "I would behold the China maiden," he told him. "It is said her beauty is beyond telling."

"Thine ears have heard truly," said the old man, "and thine eyes wilt have full value for thy silver."

And when young Wang cast his eyes upon the girl, love entered suddenly into

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his heart. "She is slender as the flowering bamboo," he whispered, "and her skin is smooth as the lotus bud at dawn."

"And the words of her speech," added the old *majoo,* "are as pleasant as the tinkling of silver bells."

"May I have speech with her?" asked young Wang. "A simple phrase of welcome, perhaps, since she has come from such a far-off place?"

"Not for ten silver pieces!" the *majoo* replied hastily. "It is a thing strictly forbidden by the Council of Elders."

The girl Ming Yan heard this whispering behind the screen and looked up suddenly, her delicate hands fluttering like startled doves until she read the face of Wang Kai and saw the light which shone in his eyes. Then her hands grew quiet, and the fear melted from her eyes, and she gave the youth a trembling little smile.

"Surely Kwan-yin has set a sign upon your forehead, my son," cackled the old man. "Upon no other has the girl smiled, and there have been many before you; aye, the stairs grow thin with their coming and going."

Wang's breath quickened and his feet stumbled in the dark as they went down again, so that the *majoo* spoke to him sharply, for even then the Council of Elders were holding parley on the girl's fate.

"It is not seemly that we keep the maiden here, in this house of men," said one. "Already my wife speaks of it with two-edged words. We must find a suitable husband for Ming Yan—and quickly."

Thus was it decided, and as the news spread far and wide the old *majoo* began to wheeze and groan from his endless trips up and down the dark stairs. There were some who spoke of Ming Yan as the China Bride, and others as the Maiden with Nine Fathers, but in his heart young Wang called her Lotus Bud, and his eyes grew dark with gazing at the moon when he should have been wrapped in sleep.

"Has she smiled upon any other?" he asked the *majoo* again and again.

"She has not," replied the old man. "But Moy Sing, the silk merchant, comes faithfully every day to feast his eyes upon her beauty."

With trembling fingers Wang produced a little jade *choy*—a good-luck charm. "Wilt thou place this into her hand? It is a trifle without value, but I had it from my honorable father, who received it from his venerable sire, who was a scholar and wore yellow silk."

"It shall be done," replied the old man, "for clearly you alone have found favor in her eyes. But it is best you speak quickly to the Council of Elders. The silk merchant is a rival to be feared."

NOW the friendship which existed between young Wang Kai and Hugh Lee was a legend in Chinatown. The bonds of their affection could not have been knit more closely had they been true blood brothers, a fact made all the more remarkable since they were also partners in a tourists' shop whose shelves held everything from lichee nuts to genuine *fei-tsui* jade.

"There is an evil weight on thy spirit, Wang Kai," said Hugh Lee, "for thy mouth droops like the branches of the willow tree. If a pain-devil has entered thy skin, let the apothecary be sent for. But if thy trouble be of the spirit, share the burden with your unworthy friend, and its weight will be lessened by half."

Wang sighed heavily. "It is because of my great love for the girl Ming Yan, and the sea of silver that stands between us. Across the water the parent of a girl-child must save up money to purchase a husband for her, but in this land a goodly price must be paid before she leaves her father's roof."

"But here that is the law," Hugh Lee declared solemnly. "Only yesterday I sought enlightenment of this puzzling fact from the Rice-face who drives the look-see wagon, and he informed me it was the Law of Supply and Demand."

"There may well be such a law," young Wang answered, "for this is a goodly coun-

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try, but there are many strange customs."

"True," said Hugh Lee, "nevertheless it is time that you take a wife and get thyself sons. Go to these Elders and tell them you will buy the girl Ming Yan in marriage. Tell them also that the silver will be ready on the First Day of the First Moon."

"But," said the young man, "my venerable, uncle, Wang Hop, has strictly forbidden me to enter the lists for the hand of Ming Yan. Do I but mention her name and he wails in a loud voice, as though I beat him with sticks."

"Thou art of years to choose thine own path," Hugh Lee reminded. "I will burn scented sticks before the household joss to lessen the resolve of the elder Wang."

Now all Chinatown knew that young Wang's uncle was an old rascal and a leech who squandered his nephew's hard-won substance in gaming and riotous living. None but the costliest and most delicate foods would content his stomach, as though he were a High Priest to the Belly God. Then he would be off to the gaming tables, when an hour's play at *fantan* might rob young Wang of the fruits of his day's toil.

However, this way of life was most pleasing to old Wang Hop, and he looked upon the girl Ming Yan as an enemy who threatened his slothful ease. So he took counsel of his fears lest his luxurious estate be lessened, and in due course made his kow-tow before the Elders.

"I have schemed a scheme," he announced craftily. "The girl Ming Yan is good to look upon, and there is no lack of sutiors. It is fitting that an even higher price be set upon her hand. And let the marriage-money be sent across the deep water to help drive out the brown monkeys who kill our people with devil-machines. Is this not a worthy plan, and suitable in all points?"

THE Council of Elders agreed, and when young Wang heard the unhappy news he hastened to his friend, Hugh Lee. "I am destroyed!" he wailed. "The honorable Elders of the Tsin Tien have now doubled the marriage-price of Ming Yan. And already has Moy Sing the silk merchant offered a sum lacking but one-tenth of the new price."

"Do not yield to thy rival," Lee answered angrily. "As thy love is greater than the silk merchant's, so let thy price be greater."

"But where am I to find the silver?" Wang cried. "It is true Ming Yan has graciously accepted the embroidered robe that was my First Gift of Intentions, but how shall I meet the Elders' demands?"

"There have been many suitors and the value of the maiden has been raised in their eyes," Lee said. "I have looked upon her, and indeed she is truly pleasing to all the senses. Perhaps she is worth even this new price."

"My heart is sick for love of her, Hugh Lee," young Wang replied. "She is fair as a rose among lilies. I will have her to marry, or none other."

"Then we must find a way for thee," Hugh Lee answered, and gestured toward the cash drawer. "If thine only lack be silver, fill the need. There has never been talk of mine and thine in our dealings together."

"Aiee!" Wang murmured sorrowfully. "Already have I taken far beyond my just share to fill the needs of my august uncle, which are indeed as a well without bottom and endless as the Great Wall. It will be said that I snatch the rice from the mouths of thy worthy wife and thy growing son."

"Hearken to me, Wang Kai," said Hugh Lee. "Between us there is a debt of long standing. When I wished to purchase myself a wife, did you not sustain yourself for many moons upon unseasoned rice and watered tea-dust, that I might have the price for my heart's desire? It is but just that my honorable debt be paid in kind. My purse is thine, even to the very bottom."

But the wily old uncle, Wang Hop, was not to be so easily turned aside from his scheming, and this time he took counsel with Moy Sing, the silk merchant. With much snickering and silent laughter he set

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forth his plans before his nephew's rival, and within a short time the fruits of the old rascal's cunning was bitter on the tongue of young Wang.

"I am plagued by devils!" he cried despairingly to his friend. "I labor to fill a barrel which has no bottom. The First Moon approaches and I have less silver than yesterday, and tomorrow will have still less."

"How so?" Lee questioned.

"My venerable relative has found new delight in a game of chance called Po-kair. It is a game devised by the Rice-face, and there are painted cards of strange design. This Po-kair has entered mine uncle's spirit like a burning fever. Each night he goes to the house of Mark Sin, the gambler, and returns with nothing but his shadow."

Hugh Lee shook his head. "That is ill news indeed. The ears of this humble person ache at the sound of thy words."

"But there is worse!" Wang cried distractedly. "Wang Hop has lost not only the silver in his purse, but a further sum which he did not have, and Mark Sin will look to me for payment."

Lee's breath hissed angrily. "Thy honorable uncle should have his beard stricken from his chin, for it gives the lie to his wisdom. That your hard-earned silver should be thus paid out to pleasure another man's folly is a thing not to be borne in silence."

"It is written that a son must honor his father's debt," Wang answered gravely. "My honorable sire and Wang Hop were of one flesh and one bone. It must not be forgotten."

"But thy silver is already pledged for the First Day of the First Moon," Lee returned hotly. "Let Wang Hop make up the difference from the iron box which he hides under his pillow."

Wang shook his head. "The iron box must not be spoken of, for it contains the silver pieces my uncle has put by for his smooth-grained coffin. Indeed, Hugh Lee, it is the merchant Moy Sing who is the seed of this bitter apple. It is he who fills my venerable relative with reckless counsel."

"Then his evil-doing should be written in large letters and posted on a wall for all men to read," Lee said.

"I have spoken to Moy Sing with hard words," young Wang said, "but he made mock of me, boasting that if I dared to raise my hand against one who had double my years he would bring me to shame before the Council of Elders."

"There is a loose end in every tangled knot," Hugh Lee remarked. "I will seek for it with patient fingers."

SO IT was that upon a noon hour, when the crooked streets of Chinatown were at full tide, Hugh Lee accosted the silk merchant outside the Plum Blossom Joss House.

"Moy Sing, I would have a word with you. Last night I dreamed a dream in which I saw thy father and thy grandfather and thy great-grandfather walking endlessly in the Halls of the Shadow-world, forbidden to join the company of their ancestors. Tell me, seller of silks, are all the men of the House of Moy chicken-livered cowards?"

"That is a lie!" Moy Sing shouted in quick anger.

"We shall presently make test of it, for it has reached my ears that you make claim to the hand of Ming Yan. It is fitting that none but a true Son of the Dragon should wed with the *tai yan*, whose honorable father was a Lord of the Long Swords."

"I am not deceived by thy meddling," Moy Sing replied warily. "The voice is that of Hugh Lee, but the words bear the mark of Wang Kai."

"Hearken, Moy Sing. It is not seemly that a beardless youth such as Wang Kai should come to blows with one who is of an age to be his father. But we two are of a match in age and height and weight of flesh, and I have sworn by Tao and the Five Books to make test of your fitness to seek the hand of Ming Yan.

"If you will not fight with me, I shall

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spread my dream abroad in a loud voice, and if that will not shame you, then I will set upon you in the open street with my fists, as is the custom in this land of the Rice-face."

"Thou shalt pay for this boasting with thy life!" Moy Sing hissed. "Thy braggart tongue shall be slit out and cast to the dogs."

"As Tao wills," Hugh Lee said, "but there must be no delay for the purchase of lessons in secret thrusts. Tomorrow, at the hour of sunset, I will seek for you in the empty house which stands in Peking Court. Let no one but the apothecary Lum Kai be present. The choice of weapons is thine. I care not whether the knives be the length of an arm or the shortness of a hand, so they have a sharp edge and cut deeply."

Now Hugh Lee was greatly troubled when the heat of his brave words had cooled, for he was a man of peaceful pursuits and entirely without skill in the use of weapons. Never did hours pass by so swiftly, and there came a sudden dryness in his mouth when he found Moy Sing waiting for him in the shadows of Peking Court.

"May Yo Fei guide my unskilful hand!" he groaned, but advanced with the brisk pace of a man bidden to a feast. And as he came nearer he saw that the silk merchant's arm was wrapped with bandages, almost to the thickness of his thigh.

"My spirit is weighed down by ten thousand sorrows over most unhappy event," Moy Sing said smoothly. "In the darkness of the night I stumbled and fell upon the stairs of my lodging. Here is the apothecary Lum Kai to bear witness to my words."

"It is true," Lum Kai said. "If the hand of Moy Sing is restored to use by the First or Second Moon it will speak well of my skill."

"This is a coolie-trick to hide thy lack of courage," Hugh Lee declared angrily. "It was thy lying tongue that tripped and fell over the truth."

"Have I not taken oath to face thee, knife in hand?" Moy Sing said slyly. "Do I ask aught but that we meet on even terms? Is it in thy mind to set upon a man who is in great pain and half a cripple?"

THEN Hugh Lee saw that his contriving was of no avail, and returned sadly to his friend Wang Kai. "I have failed of my purpose," he said. "It is needful we find another road to the goal. Thy revered uncle must be persuaded to a different manner of living. This inconsequential person will strive to lead him into the Desirable Path."

"Thy breath will be wasted," Wang mourned. "Whenever I am moved to speak a few words of most respectful protest, Wang Hop wails that I have neglected to read the Book of Filial Piety."

"I have observed that elderly male relatives are always well grounded in the Book of Filial Piety," Hugh Lee remarked acidly. "It is indeed a great burden to have such an uncle. Thy patience must be worn smooth as a pebble."

Then Hugh Lee lowered his voice. "Is it not rumored that the apothecaries have a pale blue powder which can be had for a price, and which brings the Long Sleep to troublesome ancients whose shadows wear out the floors?"

"Do not make mock of my troubles, Hugh Lee," Wang begged. "No deed of mine shall ever shorten my venerable uncle's breath. How else could I hope to look upon the faces of my honorable ancestors in the Shadow-world?"

"Indeed, Wang, I did but jest," his friend replied. "A deed of blood against thy venerable uncle is a thing not to be thought of. But we must persuade his feet from the present path.

"Convey word to the elder Wang that the house of Hugh Lee would be honored to receive his presence for a space of days, should he condescend to turn his steps thither.

"After the three-day guest-rites have been fulfilled, I will then make chance to talk with him respecting the beauty of

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Ming Yan, and your great love for her. Tao willing, much good may come of it."

Young Wang stirred uneasily. "My revered relative is in delicate health, and easily moved to anger. Thou wilt not vex his spirit, nor plague him with heated words on my behalf?"

Hugh Lee smiled quietly upon his friend, while his lean fingers gently caressed a carving of green mutton-jade whose intricate curves were a solace to the spirit.

"I promise I shall do naught, Wang Kai, that is not plainly sanctioned by the Book of Rites, respecting the treatment of illustrious guests. The hospitality of Hugh Lee shall be a model and a precept to my son, and my son's son."

And so it was that Hugh Lee called his wife to him that night. "Prepare the house to receive an illustrious guest," he commanded. "The venerable Wang Hop comes to visit us tomorrow. See that there are scented sticks for the shrine of Kwan-yin, and fresh incense for the bowl beneath the ancestral tablets. Go at once and purchase suitable meats and provisions."

"There is in the market a plump duck or solid flesh," the woman suggested. "It is true it has only recently been killed—"

Hugh Lee frowned. "Shall we set meat that is without flavor before Wank Kai's honorable relative? Purchase a duck which has been long upon the hook, whose flesh is soft and with eyes well-sunken, for that is the test of a worthy fowl fit for the delicate stomach of a discerning person."

"Do we then have a mandarin for a guest?" the thrifty wife retorted. "Mine ears reported it was but that rascally old uncle of Wang's come to share our rice."

"Let everything be according to my words," Hugh Lee commanded. "And when our guest arrives, see that our little Wei's hands are clean, that he makes his kow-tow gracefully, and that his skull-cap with the heron feather sits properly on his head."

GRUMBLING under her breath, the woman set about executing the orders of her lord and master. Rice and soy stew with thin shreds of meat had been considered sufficient entertainment for the visits of her own relatives, but for Wang Kai's wastrel uncle there must be roast duck, pork fat and chicken with rice wine, pickled seeds and all manner of sweetmeats!

When Wang Hop appeared, Hugh Lee bowed gravely three times, greeting his guest with the customary flowery phrases. The old man, grossly fat and wheezing from the steep flight of steps he had climbed, replied with similar compliments, sniffing the air with anticipation.

Hugh Lee lifted the old man's hand and touched it respectfully to his forehad. "Let us take rice," he said.

"Fat to thy bones!" said Wang Hop politely, his eyes sparkling at sight of the feast which had been prepared in his honor.

"And to thine, with long life to the fat!" Hugh Lee responded.

The host ate but sparingly, fascinated by the sight of Wang Hop's voracious appetite and apparently limitless capacity. The old man made gluttonous inroads on the duck, the chicken stew, the strips of pork, the vegetables with their richly spiced sauces. He smacked his lips with approving gusto, and his rumbling belches were not merely Celestial politeness, but genuinely inspired.

"It is a matter for sorrow that thy nephew, Wang Kai, would not come to share this feast," Hugh Lee put in slyly "He says he cannot take of food for love of the little *tai yan* from over the far water. It is a great pity."

"Wang Kai is a fool!" the old man snapped, licking the sweet coating of candied pork fat from his thick fingers. "But need we waste speech on such a trifling thing as woman-love when before us there are tempting dishes, still untasted?"

Hugh Lee was silent, watching Wang's uncle devour at one meal what would have sufficed their frugal table for a week, and he began to understand more clearly the reasons for his friend's despair.

But over the rice-wine and sweetmeats Hugh Lee said "This is a significant day

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for the house of Lee, and must be fittingly celebrated. Let us summon the poet and the flute-player so that, having restored the flesh, we may brighten the spirit.

"Then if it be thy pleasure, I will send for friends who play chuckaloo or the game of Po-kair. It will serve to make pleasant these hours before the time of sleeping."

Wang Hop gave his gracious assent, and there ensued an evening of gaming and merriment so loud and boisterous that Hugh Lee's neighbors sat hushed and wondering, and in the darkness of the kitchen Hugh Lee's wife clasped little Wei to her and murmured endless prayers to Kwan-yin the Merciful.

Later, when the old man was sodden with wine and picked clean of pocket through his reckless gaming, Hugh Lee carefully led his stumbling steps into the guest chamber. In two seconds Wang Hop was snoring lustily, his head close beside the locked iron chest which had accompanied him to Lee's house, and whose weight had been quietly tested by Lee's wife.

With the thoughtfulness of the rare host, Hugh Lee set within reach a further supply of rice-spirits and another bowl of candied pork fat, in case his guest should awake in the night and again desire to ease his hunger.

AND on the third day of this riotous feasting and carousing, Hugh Lee's wife came to him to say that the household money would not last beyond midhour, but Lee put more silver into her hand from their secret store, which had been set aside against debt and disaster.

"This is madness, my lord," the woman said sharply. "When the First Moon is at hand and there is a reckoning of our debts, it will go hard with us."

"Hold thy peace, mother of my son. Have I not often told thee of the Elder Debt I have of my friend Wang Kai. Shall I deny the reckoning in his hour of need?"

Meanwhile, young Wang wandered despairingly through a dark world whose only light was the remembered smile of little Ming Yan. "My heart is filled with fears that never sleep, Hugh Lee," he said. "The silver pieces mount so slowly. The old *majoo* swears that my Lotus Bud holds always in her hand my little jade *choy*, but of what avail is it if I do not have the full marriage-price at the First Moon? Unless you persuade my venerable uncle to his ways the silk merchant will have Ming Yan for his bride."

"Be of firm heart, Wang Kai," said his friend. "At a suitable hour I will again speak of thy affairs to the elder Wang, and he will doubtless be converted to a more decorous way of life. Time and patience change the mulberry leaf into lustrous silk."

But when he was shut up in his own chamber, Hugh Lee marked how the good silver pieces were melting away under his lavish hospitality. Wang Hop was proving insatiable in his appetite for rich food, spiced wines and the game of Po-kair.

"I have fastened a mill-stone around my neck!" Hugh Lee lamented. "The old man's belly is deeper than my purse." But to his guest he turned always a smooth and smiling face.

"The charm of your hospitality is gracious incense to the spirits of your honorable ancestors," Wang Hop wheezed pleasantly.

"Of what use is good fortune but to delight our friends," Lee observed politely. "Eat well and to thy fill, Wang Hop. Each day more silver comes into the shop from the look-see people who come in the devil wagon. With care, it may even be possible for Wang Kai to pay the marriage-price of the girl Ming Yan—"

"Do not speak of Ming Yan!" cried Wang Hop. "Her name strikes upon my ears like a blow. She is one who would snatch the rice from an old man's bowl and the covers from his bed so that his spirit would grow weak and depart before its time!"

And that night Hugh Lee sat on the edge of his bed and counted the shrunken remains of the silver he had put by against the Day of Reckonings. *"Aiee!"* he

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mourned. "I have dug a deep pit and fallen into it myself. The name of Hugh Lee will be but a reproach in the ears of Wang Kai, for I have failed my friend in his hour of need."

So, through the hours of the night, he pondered sadly on his defection in friendship; yet he could find no new path to follow.

He tossed and turned restessly on his *k'ang* until, in the dreary hour before dawn, his wife shook him by the shoulder. "I fear something is amiss with thy guest," she whispered. "In his chamber there is a sound of deep groaning."

QUICKLY awake, Hugh Lee was instantly at Wang Hop's bedside. The old man was in fearful state, with muscles knotted and fingers clenched in pain. His lips puffed in and out between his moans, and he was powerless to move his bulky mass of fat flesh.

Hugh Lee held up the lamp to see his face more clearly, but Wang Hop could only groan in answer to his questions. Lee put down the lamp and left the room.

"Wang Hop is in great pain," he informed his wife. "Only this night did I point out to him most respectfully the dangers of eating too much pork fat. Go at once and arouse the apothecary. Tell him we have an honored guest who lies moaning and groaning, and bid him bring what is needful."

But the most skilful arts of the apothecary were in vain. The pain-devils of too-rich pork and candied fats had burrowed so deeply into old Wang Hop's monstrous paunch that all the potions of ginseng and rhubarb and ground-up rhino horn could not prevail.

Shortly before dawn the spirit of Wang Hop flickered and went out, like a candle-flame which is drowned at last in its own melted fat. The apothecary was given his fee and sent away.

"*Aiee!* I must carry these unhappy tidings to Wang Kai myself," said Hugh Lee. "On the way I will stop and order a *feng-shui* chart to be drawn, so that we may learn the auspicious day and hour for burial."

"And did I not say, my lord, that no good would come of this rich feasting?" his wife demanded. "Does my lord have the taxes of a province that he should day after day set his table in a manner fit for a mandarin?"

"It is in truth a sadness and a sorrow," Hugh Lee answered meekly. "The Lords of the Upper Realm have shown their displeasure, and we shall return at once to the former ways of our household."

"It would indeed be well, and past time!" his wife answered sharply, her tongue gathering courage from her husband's unusual meekness. "Wang Kai will now inherit the old man's iron box, which is of goodly size and weight, and must surely contain great treasure. Perchance he would not grudge thee a loan from the iron box of his august relative, so that we will not be beggared when the First Day of the First Moon is at hand?"

For the first time Hugh Lee made an angry gesture. "Hearken to me, woman, with both thine ears. Come what may, no word of this outlay on behalf of the elder Wang must ever be spoken within the hearing of my friend."

Then the dark eyes of Hugh Lee's wife grew slowly round as jade buttons. "Ah! So thou didst plan all this!" she whispered. "Thou didst feed the old man a surfeit of rich hospitality, so that his own gluttony brought him to his death!"

She studied Hugh Lee intently, and he returned her glance unwaveringly and with calm. His tone was a grave one when he told her:

"I did but honor Wang Kai's venerable uncle in strict accordance with the Book of Rites. Is it seemly for the host to restrain the appetite of his honored guest?"

Hugh Lee smiled a bland smile and tucked his hands into his sleeves, for the name of Hugh Lee is only the White Devils' way of saying *Hu Li*, which signifies a Fox.

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MEN of DARING

by Stookie Allen

SPECIAL EVENT
"THE BRAVEST MAN IN RADIO," IS WHAT THEY CALL "SKEET" MILLER, SPECIAL EVENTS MAN FOR A LARGE RADIO CO. SKEET HAS BROADCAST EVERYTHING FROM SUBMARINE DISASTERS TO TRANS-OCEANIC FLIGHTS. — ONCE, THE NAVY WAS TESTING A DEVICE THAT WOULD ENABLE MEN TO ESCAPE FROM A SUNKEN SUB. BEFORE, IT HAD BEEN POSSIBLE FOR ALL THE CREW TO ESCAPE WITH THE EXCEPTION OF ONE MAN, THE LAST ONE....
JOIN THE NAVY
...THIS MAN, UNABLE TO FIX THE RELEASE FOR HIMSELF, WAS OBLIGED TO PERISH.
"WONDER WHAT IT'S LIKE TO BE THE LAST MAN TO ESCAPE," MUSED SKEET — AND HE ASKED THE NAVY TO LET HIM BE THE GUINEA PIG IN THEIR FIRST TEST. THE NAVY DIDN'T WANT A DEAD CIVILIAN ON ITS HANDS AND DECLINED — SO SKEET JOINED THE NAVY!
"W.B." Skeet Miller
HE DARES TO GO ANYPLACE HE CAN CARRY A MICROPHONE!
SO — HE MADE HIS ESCAPE AND FLOATED UP FROM THE DEPTHS — BROADCASTING THROUGH A SPECIAL HOOD AS HE WENT!
SKEET WAS THE FIRST PASSENGER TO BROADCAST A TRANS-PACIFIC FLIGHT — GOT THE CHANCE BECAUSE HE WAS SO SMALL HE WAS ALLOWED EXTRA WEIGHT FOR HIS EQUIPMENT.
HE'S JEST A LIL' FELLER — BARELY 5 FEET TALL!
HE FIRST BECAME FAMOUS AS A NEWSPAPER REPORTER DOWN IN KENTUCKY. HE CRAWLED INTO SAND CAVE AND INTERVIEWED FLOYD COLLINS WHO WAS BURIED ALIVE! THIS SHOT HIM INTO A BIG-TIME JOB.
STOOKIE ALLEN

A True Story in Pictures Every Week

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A Complete Novelet

Paths of Conquest

By PHILIP KETCHUM

Author of "The Axe Bites Deep," "A Sword for Leif the Lucky," etc.

October 14, 1066 . . . the day that changed the destiny of the world. And toward that day, across the channel from France, raced Hugh of the house of Wilton, bearing the mystic axe *Bretwalda* the Maker and Destroyer of Kings

I

THE swineherd was tall and young, and he lounged against a tree near the Rouen road as though he had not a care in the world. None of the men-at-arms who passed that way bothered to do more than glance at him for a swineherd was unworthy of their attention. And that was as well, for though clad in rags and begrimed of face, this lounging man was no swineherd, as any who paused to see could easily have discovered. His body was well muscled and straight, and below his high forehead his blue eyes were cold and sharp.

A man clad in tattered trousers and wearing an old, gray jacket and a peasant's hat, came trudging up the road and as he neared the swineherd turned aside to talk to him. His words were strange for a Norman peasant; they were in English.

"Hugh, why stand you out here in plain sight? If you were recognized—"

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The Briton knew that if he and his companion were recognized, their lives would end in the dungeons of William of Normandy

The swineherd shrugged. "Small chance, Oliver. Those who pass seem in a great hurry to get to Rouen or away from it."

"Aye."

"What news have you?"

"None."

"The palace maid—"

"She did not come to the meeting place and when I inquired at the palace a queer look came into the eyes of the page boy. He hurried away and when he came back guards were with him. Had I not been quick to get away I would not be here. We must give up this mad plan, Hugh. There is no chance in the world that we can rescue Duke Edward of Mercia from the dungeons of William of Normandy."

Hugh Wilton smiled and placed an arm around the shoulder of his friend. "We know where Duke Edward is held. That much we have gained."

"But to what purpose?"

A long column of horsemen clattered up the road. Sunlight glinted from their armor and from the points of their long spears. At the head of the column rode the blue banner of the house of Anjou.

"More French to join with the Normans," Hugh Wilton muttered. "It is a strange army that William of Normandy is gathering. French, Bretons, Teutons, Vikings from the north. Before he is through the scum of all Europe will be at his command."

Oliver Sweyn shuddered. "Five years ago," he said slowly, "a sorcerer told me to beware the year 1066."

"I care not for sorcery," Hugh Wilton answered.

"Nor I," admitted Oliver Sweyn. "Yet this is 1066 and this year King Edward the Confessor, died. You know what has happened since. Both Tostig, his brother, and William of Normandy have claimed the English crown, which, by the Witan, was granted to Harold of Wessex. Tostig has allied himself with Hardrada, King of Norway. And you yourself have seen the preparations William of Normandy is making."

HUGH WILTON made no answer. How serious a problem England faced, he knew full well. It was that which had brought him here on an apparently hopeless mission. Shortly after Harold

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had been named King, he had sent Duke Edward of Mercia to Normandy with gifts and a message which he had thought might appease the anger of William of Normandy. But Duke Edward had been seized and thrown into the dungeons; and in Mercia, Roger Montfort had usurped Duke Edward's place. Long an enemy of Harold of Wessex, Roger Montfort was spreading dissension at a time when England's united strength was needed to preserve the kingdom.

The release of Duke Edward, Hugh Wilton knew, and his return to Mercia in England, would result in the defeat of Montfort's purpose, would throw all the power of Mercia behind King Harold. And with such help, England need not then fear either an invasion by the Vikings or by William of Normandy.

Oliver Sweyn was short and sturdy, round of face. He made a better looking peasant than he dreamed. "What now?" he asked bluntly.

Hugh Wilton had no chance to answer. A score of armored horsemen riding up the road turned suddenly aside, scattering the swine in every direction. One of the horsemen drew rein near the tree against which Hugh Wilton was leaning.

"Whose swine are these?" he demanded gruffly.

"They belong to William of Normandy," Hugh Wilton answered.

The man laughed. He was a large man, heavy, thick-featured. There was a wide scar across one cheek which drew his lips into a perpetual sneer. "We will borrow a few," he announced. "I am sure William of Normandy will not object."

Hugh Wilton shrugged. He did not move from the tree but stood watching as the man ordered those with him to go ahead. The swine were quick-footed, tough-skinned and half wild. The trees and shrubbery were thick. Using their spears, the horsemen sought to impale the animals. One tusked boar, wounded and snorting with pain, charged at the horsemen, and a horse, rearing to get out of the way, unseated his rider. But for the armor which protected him, that rider might have felt the tusks of the boar.

Seven of the swine were finally slain by the soldiers who then mounted with them and rode off without another word.

As the men clattered back down the road, Hugh Wilton drew a deep breath and slowly nodded his head. "I have it, Oliver."

"Have what, Hugh?"

"A plan. The leader of those men was Otto de Balse. He was pointed out to me once when I went to Paris with my father."

"The Tuscan."

"Aye, and William of Normandy's champion. Tomorrow, Oliver, I enter the lists."

Oliver Sweyn gasped. He stared at Hugh Wilton as though the latter were out of his mind. "Do you know what that means?" he whispered.

"It will mean freedom for Duke Edward. For a week, now, no one has dared answer de Balse's challenge. Each day he is proclaimed as William of Normandy's champion. And William of Normandy would not dare to refuse the request of the man who conquers him."

"But even should you conquer him—"

Again Hugh Wilton smiled. "Come, Oliver. Let us get back to Rouen. We will let the remainder of the swine go free. We have no more need for them."

A GREAT crowd was gathered in the palace grounds at Rouen. To one side, under a sheltering canopy, a group of nobles in shining armor and ladies in fine raiment were grouped around the throne chair of William of Normandy and circling the wide grounds were soldiers from many lands. Here and there were a few people from the town.

To the left of the Duke's canopy there were several tents. In these, the contestants in the day's games, prepared for their exhibitions or for battle, and in them, those who had been hurt were cared for. Banners and flags at various points gave to the scene a gala appearance.

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These afternoon games and contests had been started by Duke William as something to keep the soldiers and nobles occupied while they awaited the completion of his fleet, and the favorable winds which would carry them across the channel to England.

Archers from Norway vied against archers from far away Tuscany. There were duels with sword and spear, exhibitions of horsemanship, wrestling.

In these contests were the crude beginnings of the tournament which fifty years later was to come into full bloom with the beginnings of the Crusades.

Hugh Wilton and Oliver Sweyn reached the palace grounds late in the afternoon and at a time when three of the Bretons were showing their skill with the cross-bow. The rags which Hugh Wilton had worn the afternoon before had been replaced by a coat-of-mail and his blond hair was covered by a Norman helmet with a fixed nasal, protecting the nose. At his side he wore a long sword.

"This is a mad plan of yours," Oliver Sweyn said bluntly as they paused at the edge of the crowd not far from the Duke's canopy. "Forget it, Hugh. If you are recognized—"

Hugh Wilton shrugged. His friend had been talking in the same vein since the afternoon before. He stared over at the group under the canopy. Duke William, a tall, round-faced man with a very black mustache, leaned back in his throne chair, and at his side Hugh Wilton could see his wife, Matilda. At the Duke's shoulder stood Count Hendi d'Anjou, a tall, thin man, gray of hair and beard. A brief smile touched Hugh Wilton's lips. He knew Hendi d'Anjou, had met him long ago. There was little chance, he decided, that he would be unrecognized.

A shout from the crowd drew Hugh Wilton's attention away from the canopy. One of the cross-bowmen, he saw, had been proclaimed victor and several of the man's friends had rushed forward to bear him in triumph from the field.

Trumpets shrilled and the crowd suddenly grew silent. Again the trumpets sounded and as their last echo faded out a stentorial voice shouted: "Otto de Basle, the Duke's champion!"

The crowd at the far side of the field, parted, and through the lane they made there came a warrior mounted on a white charger. His armor was burnished until it reflected the sun like water and from his helmet, which was a duplicate of the one Hugh Wilton wore, there floated a plume of red feathers.

Twice around the field de Balse rode, sitting very straight in the saddle, his gold tipped spear held erect at his side. Then drawing rein in front of Duke William, he cast the gage of battle to the ground, bowed and waited silent.

Hugh Wilton turned to his companion. "If I do not come back, Oliver," he whispered swiftly, "make your way to England and fight for me at our King's side."

Oliver Sweyn nodded and tears showed in his eyes as he said, "You're a fool, Hugh, but I love you for it. God go with you."

HUGH WILTON pushed forward and started across the open space toward the canopy. A great shout arose from the crowd. He saw Otto de Balse swing down from his saddle and turn to pick up the gage of battle which he had cast to the ground, saw the Duke's champion stiffen as de Balse noticed him.

He moved steadily ahead, reached the place where lay the glove which de Balse had thrown to the ground. He stooped over, picked it up, tucked it in his belt. Again the trumpets sounded and as their echo faded, a heavy voice cried out, "A challenger to meet the Duke's champion. Your name, sir?"

Hugh Wilton was standing not more than eight paces from the canopy and he stared straight at Duke William. Before he could speak, however, someone leaned over and whispered in the Duke's ear and William of Normandy turned his head. Hugh Wilton glanced at the man who had whispered to the Duke. He felt a

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sudden chill run over his body, became aware of a deep anger boiling in his veins. Tall, thin and dark was that man who had whispered to the Duke. He had a long, crooked nose, bloodless lips, deep-set, little eyes. Roger Montfort!

Hugh Wilton sucked in a deep breath. He could hardly believe his eyes. That Roger Montfort who had ursurped Duke Edward's power in Mercia, hated King Harold of England, he knew. But that Roger Montfort would have dealings with William of Normandy was almost unbelievable. Yet there he stood at Duke William's side, a thin mocking smile on his lips.

Hugh Wilton stepped forward. He glanced over at Count Henri d'Anjou and saw that the old man had recognized him. Now, however, that made little difference, because beyond doubt, Roger Montfort knew him.

A pace from the canopy, Hugh Wilton paused. "My name," he said bluntly, "is Hugh Wilton of Mercia."

Duke William jerked to his feet. His face was flushed with anger. "What do you here?" he demanded harshly.

Hugh Wilton bowed. "I am here, Duke William, to challenge your champion. I have taken up his gage."

"And should you win?"

"And should I win I ask of you the life and freedom of Duke Edward of Mercia who is held in your dungeons."

At that bold statement, a gasp ran over those people under the canopy. Roger Montfort scowled, moistened his lips.

From Hugh Wilton's side, a thick voice said confidently, "He will not win, sire. I am de Balse."

Wilton glanced at de Balse. The man's eyes were narrowed and hard. His face, twisted by the scar on his cheek, wore its usual sneer. Looking back at the Duke, Hugh Wilton saw that Montfort was again whispering to him. And whatever it was that Montfort said must have pleased the Duke for the Duke laughed and waved his hand and cried, "Let the contest go on."

Otto de Balse turned to the lady seated at Duke William's side. "Madame," he said boldly, "I dedicate this fight to you."

There was a flutter of applause from the women who were gathered back of Matilda's chair but one of them, Hugh Wilton saw, did not clap her hands. She was a tall, slender girl, fair of hair. Her eyes were as blue as his own. Something in her face seemed familiar to him but Hugh Wilton didn't know just what it was. She was frowning slightly and it seemed to him that she looked worried. On a sudden impulse, Hugh Wilton stepped toward her. "And I, fair lady," he said boldly, "dedicate the fight to you."

Those standing near the girl drew away as though afraid of being mistakenly identified as the one Hugh Wilton meant. But the girl, herself, showed no embarrassment and it seemed to Hugh Wilton that she was pleased.

HE SWUNG around, faced de Balse. De Balse's sword was out and with a loud shout the Tuscan charged forward. Hugh Wilton jerked up his blade. He parried the blow, took a cut at the Tuscan's head, parried another and then another. And suddenly his high laugh rang out above the sound of clashing steel and the shouts of the watching crowd. Champion this man might be and feared he might have been by all in the camp.

Yet Hugh Wilton knew that he was the better man. His stature was as great as the Tuscan's, his arms were as thick, his movements swifter. From the time when he was only a boy his father had drilled him in the use of the sword and the axe. He could recall now, as he faced de Balse, the long torturous hours he had spent in developing his skill. At times he had hated his father for driving him at it, yet now he had cause to be thankful.

Around and around they circled, now one rushing to the attack, now the other. Their feet churned up thick, black dust which gathered around them like a cloud. Through it, Hugh Wilton could see that de Balse was perspiring. He did not look so

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confident, now. Fear showed in his eyes and he was biting his lips.

Hugh Wilton moved forward. He slashed down with his sword. Again and again. Each blow beat de Balse's guard lower. Once more Hugh Wilton laughed. His sword swept up and down. There was a sharp crack and the blade broke off at the hilt!

A shout went up from the crowd and a new light came into de Balse's eyes. He rushed at Hugh Wilton, blade uplifted. But Hugh Wilton did not give back. Instead, hurling the broken hilt of his sword directly at de Balse's face, he moved to meet him.

Under that swinging sword he ducked and with both hands he grasped the Tuscan's body. Up into the air he swung it while the crowd gasped in stunned amazement. Three times, then, did Hugh Wilton turn around, de Balse's twisting body held above his head. And suddenly he threw it from him as a man might have tossed a heavy timber.

The Tuscan struck the ground heavily and lay where he fell, a scant pace from the canopy. Hugh Wilton glanced over at Duke William. The Duke was standing, his mouth wide open, amazement written on his face. "A new champion! A new champion!" the crowd was shouting.

But black rage suffused the face of William of Normandy. He lifted an arm and shouted, "The guard! The guard! Seize and hold that man!"

"Your pledge, Duke William?" Hugh Wilton called.

"I will keep my pledge," William of Normandy answered. "But as for you—"

The Norman guards were rushing forward. They surrounded Hugh Wilton as a wall of steel. He had no weapon with which to defend himself. For an instant his mind turned back to the great axe which he had brought with him, the axe *Bretwalda*. It was an axe which had come down to him from his father. He would have given a lot, just then, to have held *Bretwalda* in his hands, but the axe was hidden on the outskirts of Rouen.

"Seize him!" shouted William of Normandy. "He will take Duke Edward's place in the dungeons."

The Norman guard moved forward. Over the shoulders of two of them, Hugh Wilton caught sight of the girl to whom he had dedicated the fight. She was standing proudly erect, smiling at him. And then suddenly her place was taken by Roger Montfort and on Montfort's face there was a mocking sneer. The elation Hugh Wilton had felt at his victory and in the knowledge that Duke Edward would be released, was abruptly dampened. He stepped toward Montfort but the Norman guards closed in around him, seized his arms and dragged him away.

II

THE dungeon cell was damp and bitterly cold. Foul, stagnant water seeped through the stone walls and gathered in a pool on the stone floor. Gaunt rats ventured into the cell. In the dim, half light, it sometimes seemed to Hugh Wilton that they sat around grinning at him, confident of his death and of a chance to fatten themselves off of what was left of him when he no longer had the strength to frighten them away.

There was no way of marking time save by his increasing hunger, thirst and weakness. There was no hope of escape. The door of his cell was heavy, barred and strong. When he had first been brought here Wilton had known that he would never leave. Eventual death came to all who had the ill fortune to be thrown into the dungeons under the Norman castle at Rouen.

All save one. Duke Edward of Mercia. It was here that he had been confined, and in the knowledge of his relase, Hugh Wilton felt a grim satisfaction.

In the early days of his confinement, Hugh Wilton tried to imagine what the result of Duke Edward's release would mean. In his mind he could picture Duke Edward's return to Mercia and he knew that the fighting men of Mercia would

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rally to the Duke's command. Duke Edward had a deep loyalty to King Harold of England, and aware of the strength of William of Normandy, he would give King Harold his full support. Five thousand men he could summon in a few days and five thousand men might make all the difference between defeat and victory.

Roger Montfort would have no chance against him. Though he had usurped Duke Edward's authority, he could never stand against the rightful ruler of Mercia. Duke Edwards was too well loved by his people. Montfort might tell the people of Mercia that there was no danger from the invaders and that there was no reason to leave their fields and go to battle. But when Duke Edward appeared and summoned the men, there were none who would not answer his call.

At first it was easy for Hugh Wilton to reason all that out and to understand that whatever else might be said of William of Normandy, he was at least a man of his word and would let Duke Edward go. But as time went on and as hunger gnawed at Hugh Wilton's stomach and as his throat cried out for water and as he could feel his strength slipping away from him, his mind grew clouded and the mocking smile of Roger Montfort came to torment him.

At times, then, he would imagine hearing a footfall in the corridor outside his door, would imagine the opening of the door, would vision Montfort standing out there, laughing at him.

A hand shaking Hugh Wilton's shoulder aroused him from the depths of a sodden lethargy and a voice said sharply, "Come on. Get up and follow me."

Hugh Wilton blinked. He sat up. The cell door was open and a soldier was bending over him.

"Come on," growled the soldier. "I have but little time."

Hugh Wilton got to his knees, to his feet. He leaned unsteadily against the wall. The soldier turned away, moved through the door and turned along a dim, narrow corridor.

For a moment Hugh Wilton didn't move. His mind was stunned by the suddenness of the soldier's arrival and by the open door of his cell.

"Come on," said the soldier gruffly.

He was alone. There were no others out in the corridor. And the abrupt realization that this might mean his deliverance from the dungeons went to Hugh Wilton's head like wine. With a strength which he didn't know that he still possessed, he stepped out into the corridor, started after the soldier.

Through one barred door and then another, the soldier led him. They climbed a long stairway, passed another door. Near it, three soldiers lay in a drunken stupor. Hugh Wilton stared at them.

Across a hallway the soldier had opened still another door. "Outside," he said sharply.

Through that doorway, Hugh Wilton could see the thin crescent of a moon and a star-studded sky. No sight which had ever met his eyes had seemed more wonderful. He crossed over to the door, passed through it.

Two men stepped forward, took him by the arms and started leading him away from the towering wall of the castle. Who they were, Hugh Wilton didn't know; where they were taking him, he didn't know. A sudden weakness swept over him. His body sagged against one of the men and again his mind clouded.

A SWEET, life-giving liquid warmed his stomach and from somewhere near him a voice said: "That's enough now. He can have more later."

Hugh Wilton opened his eyes. He was lying on a straw pallet in a dimly lighted room and a heavy, red-faced woman was kneeling at his side. In her hand she held a bowl and from the bowl came a delicious smell. Hugh Wilton reached for it but the woman drew away and from behind her the same voice which he had heard before said, "Not now. You can have more later."

Hugh Wilton turned his eyes that way. Beyond the kneeling woman stood the tall,

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slender figure of a girl. A dark cloak covered her body and the hood was pulled over her head. She turned slightly and the candlelight fell on her face. It was a small, round face. It was a face Hugh Wilton remembered. It was the face of the girl to whom he had dedicated his fight with Otto de Balse.

"You?" he said. "You did this for me?"

The girl looked at him steadily, shook her head. "I did it for a long-legged awkward boy who once came to Paris and whose father did a service for the Count of Anjou."

Hugh Wilton knew, then, why the girl's face had seemed familiar. This was the daughter of Count Henri of Anjou. She had been with her father in Paris on that occasion long ago just as he had been there with his father.

"Thyra d'Anjou," he murmured.

A brief smile touched the girl's lips. "You remember my name. I had not thought—"

The girl's voice broke off as there was a sudden commotion at the door. Hugh Wilton raised himself up on his elbow. The door burst open and Oliver Sweyn came into the room. He was breathless and there was a cut on his cheek. Blood dripped from a wounded arm.

"Hugh!" he cried.

"Oliver!"

Oliver Sweyn hurried over to where Hugh Wilton lay. "Thank God you are free," he said huskily, dropping on his knees. "I was afraid—"

"What has happened?" asked Thyra d'Anjou swiftly. "Have the guards—"

"No. It was not the castle guards."

"Then—"

"Have you told Hugh about Duke Edward?"

Hugh Wilton straightened up. He felt a little dizzy but his friend's excitement had gripped him. "What about Duke Edward?" he demanded. "Didn't William of Normandy free him?"

"Aye. He freed him, all right. But he freed a man who was almost dead. Had it not been for Count Henri d'Anjou I doubt if he would have lived. He had had no food for weeks, Hugh. He was thin, weak. Like—like you—"

A sharp fear gripped Hugh Wilton's heart. "Then he did go to England?"

"He could not go. Henri d'Anjou took care of him."

"And William of Normandy? Has he left for England?"

"He sailed with his army more than a week ago."

HUGH WILTON got slowly to his feet. He stared at Oliver Sweyn. All that he had tried, then, he suddenly realized, had gone for nothing. William of Normandy was already in England. Perhaps he had already met and defeated King Harold.

"I made myself known to Count Henri," Oliver Sweyn was saying, "and I secured a boat to take Duke Edward to England as soon as he was strong enough to make the journey. It is not yet too late, or it was not too late up to an hour ago. William of Normandy has not yet met the English. He landed at Pevensey and has been ravaging the coast, waiting for the English to march and meet him. A messenger brought me that word from England. He also brought me word that King Harold met and defeated his brother Tostig and Kind Hardrada, though at a terrific loss to his army."

"Then there is still a chance?" Hugh Wilton cried. "If Duke Edward can reach England, if he can rally Mercia, the cause is not lost. Where is Duke Edward, now?"

Oliver Sweyn stared at his wounded arm. "In the hands of men sent to take him to England—men sent by Roger Montfort."

"What!"

"Only a few minutes ago did they arrive. I tried to stop them but there were too many. They put him in a coach, headed for Le Havre."

Hugh Wilton's eyes turned from side to side. Over in one corner of the room he saw the axe *Bretwalda* and at the sight of it he drew a deep breath. He moved

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that way, reached for the long handle. A great weapon was this axe which had come down to him from his father. Both the head and handle were of the finest steel and the cutting edge of the axe was a full six hands wide. Above that edge was the deeply engraven name, *Bretwalda* and over those letters there were nine blood red jewels. Once there had been twelve, but three were lost.

So heavy was the axe that the average man could not wield it, yet to Hugh Wilton, the axe had no great weight. His father had told him its story—that to a Wilton, the strength to wield *Bretwalda* came from the axe itself, and not from any physical prowess. What truth there was in that Hugh Wilton did not know, yet this axe had become the symbol of his family. In its mystic powers, his father had believed and he half believed in those powers himself. Certainly, with it in his hands, he felt an assurance which nothing could shake.

The red faced woman was bandaging Oliver Sweyn's arm and near her, Hugh Wilton noticed the bowl from which he had been fed. He moved that way, reached for the bowl, drained it.

"Duke Edward, and no other," he said slowly, "can arouse all of Mercia. It is not yet too late."

"Those men who took Duke Edward will see that he never reaches England," Oliver Sweyn muttered.

"Aye, but we will see that he does reach England. Get us two horses, Oliver. We ride after them, to Le Havre. They would not dare to slay Duke Edward here in Normandy after William of Normandy's pledge. They will wait until they are crossing the channel. If we can overtake them—"

DURING all this, Thyra d'Anjou had been standing to one side, glancing from Hugh Wilton to Oliver Sweyn, but now, as Oliver turned to the door, she moved that way and stood before it.

"No," she said sharply. "You are not going to La Havre."

Oliver stopped, frowning. He looked over at Hugh Wilton.

"What do you mean?" Hugh Wilton asked.

The girl's lips tightened and she lifted her head, proudly. "I am my father's daughter," she answered, "and my father, at the request of King Philip of France, fights at the side of William of Normandy." The girl looked over at Hugh Wilton. "I bribed the guards to release you from the dungeons to pay an old debt of my family's but I cannot let you escape to England to fight against my father, or to see that Duke Edward gets there to raise more men for the English king."

Hugh Wilton scowled. "I am an Englishman," he said bluntly. "What I have to do is clear. Oliver, find us two horses."

"No!" cried Thyra d'Anjou. "If you leave this room I will summon the guard. If you—"

Hugh Wilton stepped swiftly forward, seized Thyra d' Anjou and pulled her away from the door. The girl screamed. His arm went around her and his hand closed over her mouth. "The horses, Oliver," he said sharply.

Oliver rushed from the room while Hugh held the struggling figure of the girl who had been responsible for his escape from the dungeons. She was stronger than she looked and it was all he could do to hold her fast. Her hair came loose and tumbled around her shoulders. He could feel her teeth biting at the palm of his hand. From across the room the red-faced woman watched them uncertainly.

Wilton's emotions, during the moments which followed, were of a strange mixture. He felt deep regret that he couldn't better repay this girl for what she had done for him. He felt amazement at her strength, and at the same time he was acutely conscious of the softness of her body and of the scent of her hair. Yet beyond all this and more important than anything else lay the knowledge of his responsibility to his king and the realization of how essential it was that Duke Edward return to Mercia in time to arouse

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that part of the country to the king's support.

Footsteps hammered up to the door and the door burst open. "I have a coach," Oliver called from outside. "It will be easier on you, Hugh, and it will still get us to Le Havre before Roger Montfort's men can put out from the harbor. They will not leave before dawn."

Still holding the girl, Hugh Wilton moved to the door. He was thankful for Oliver's wisdom in securing a coach, not only because in his own weakened condition a coach would be better than a long ride by horse. But also because he knew that they didn't dare leave Thyra d' Anjou or the red-faced woman behind to give an alarm.

"Bring the other woman," he said to Oliver. "And my axe. Are the horses fresh."

"They will make it."

Wilton nodded. He lifted Thyra and carried her to the coach.

III

THE road to Le Havre ran along the Seine. It was rough and the coach bounced along at a mad pace. Wilton braced himself in one of the two seats. In the other, facing him, were Thyra and the red-faced woman. The night was dark and Hugh couldn't see either of them. He felt a little thankful for that. As he had placed Thyra in the coach the expression of scorn on her face had cut him like a knife.

Oliver was driving with all the skill he possessed. Wilton wondered, several times, if a coach had ever before traveled as fast as this one. At times it rocked perilously on two wheels and seemed about to go over; and time and time again, heavy jolts almost threw him from the seat.

Bretwalda was on the floor beneath his feet and the knowledge that it was there gave him a deep assurance. Before they had left Rouen he had said to Oliver, "Get us to Le Havre before those men of Roger Montfort's can sail with Duke Edward. That is all I ask."

"And when we get there?" Oliver Sweyn had inquired.

"And when we get there," Hugh Wilton had said grimly, "we will take over the boat. With Duke Edward we will sail for England. There may still be time to rally Mercia behind the king."

He kept saying that to himself, over and over, as the coach rocked on through the night. And though he knew that Oliver was driving the horses to death, he kept saying under his breath, "Faster—faster—faster—"

He knew by what a narrow thread hung the fate of England. If they failed to overtake Roger Montfort's men before they sailed he knew that Duke Edward would never reach England alive. And without the help which Duke Edward could give to the king he was afraid that William of Normandy might conquer.

England was still not a united country. The old divisions persisted. Men of Wessex had few dealings with men of East Anglia; men of Northumberland dealt suspiciously with men of Mercia. Only their leaders could unite them. And with Duke Edward gone and Roger Montfort stirring up old enmities, King Harold's power was broken.

"Faster—faster—faster—" Hugh Wilton breathed. "There may yet be time! There may yet be time!"

The eastern sky was beginning to grow light and the stars were fading in the sky. Hugh could make out Thyra's face. She was looking straight at him without seeing him. If she felt any fear it did not show in her face. Proud and unbending, one hand clutched to the coach strap and the other to the seat, she held her place. The red-faced woman was no longer red faced. She looked pale and frightened.

With a series of sudden jolts, the coach stopped. Hugh Wilton flung open the door, stepped outside. His legs felt weak and a blinding dizziness assailed him. He leaned back against the coach, pressed a hand over his eyes.

Oliver clambered down to his side. "We're here," he said swiftly. "Yonder is

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the harbor and there is only one boat. There are none within sight on the water."

Hugh Wilton blinked, nodded. On the shore near the boat there was another coach and near it were several horses. Between them and the boat lay some score of wretched hovels in which lived the fishermen who made this place their home.

ON THE boat there were signs of activity. It is a small boat with only one tall mast and as Hugh Wilton looked that way, men working at the ropes began raising a square sail.

"Drive on down there," Hugh Wilton ordered. "Drive straight into the water, as close to the boat as you can get."

He climbed back into the coach, picked up *Bretwalda*.

"You are going to try to take that boat alone?" Thyra whispered.

"Oliver and I." Hugh Wilton nodded.

"You haven't a chance."

"Nevertheless we must take it."

The girl looked at him strangely. She bit her lips as the coach lurched on down toward the harbor.

As the horses splashed into the water, Wilton opened the door once more. It was a deep harbor and almost at once the horses were floundering beyond their depth. But because it was deep, the boat was also close to the shore, not more than a few paces from where the coach started to float. At the vessel's rail, six or eight startled faces stared out at the coach. Hugh Wilton threw his great axe directly at them and he saw the men scramble back.

He jumped into the water, splashed toward the boat, sinking once but kicking his way to the surface again. Near him was a rope. He grasped it, went up that rop hand over hand, sprawled to the deck, got up and rushed forward to where two ment were bending over the axe. And hurling those men aside, he lifted *Bretwalda* into the air.

Those near him in that moment were only fishermen, owners of the boat, perhaps. They had been startled at the sight of a coach plunging into the water, at the axe flung on board, at his own arrival when he clambered up the rope. They fell back from him as he lifted the axe, surprise and bewilderment showing in their faces.

But those were not the only men on board for suddenly half a score, fully armored, burst around the side of the cabin and rushed toward Hugh Wilton with drawn swords.

In the instant before they clashed, Hugh recognized several of those men as men he knew for friends of Montfort. And despite the straggling beard on his face and his haggard appearance, some of them must have recognized him for he heard his name shouted, and saw one or two of them fall back. The others, however, came on and the sudden, sharp clashing of steel sounded across the harbor as they met.

The details of that fight on the boat were never very clear in Hugh Wilton's mind.

Swinging *Bretwalda* above his head he met their charge and under the slashing strokes of his great axe he could feel them giving back. Screams, hoarse, agonizing cries, shouts and yells arose above the sound of the battle. Sword points pricked Hugh Wilton's arms and legs but closer than that, none of those men could get. The axe was like a protecting wall of steel. Of its great weight he was not conscious, but only of an exhilarating sense of power as he swung it and as men went down under its hungry bite.

Oliver Sweyn, a sword in his good arm, was suddenly at his side. How he had come on board, Hugh Wilton didn't know, but the sight of his friend brought a shout from his throat.

"After them!" Oliver yelled. "After them!"

The defenders of the boat broke and fled under their combined assault. Several sprang into the sea, others cringed away, dropping their weapons. And as suddenly as it had started, the fight was over.

Hugh Wilton lowered the great axe.

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He leaned back against the cabin. What had sustained him during that fight he didn't know. Now that it was over he could hardly stand erect and a great pain was tearing at his stomach.

Oliver came running up. "He's here. Duke Edward is here and is safe. And now—"

"And now for England," Hugh Wilton interrupted. "The women in the coach?"

"I will see to them and to men to sail the ship," Oliver Sweyn promised. "Duke Edward is in the cabin."

Hugh Wilton nodded. He turned and moved unsteadily toward the cabin's door.

UNDER the spur of a heavy wind, the fishing boat put out from the harbor. Gold, of which Oliver Sweyn had a goodly supply, bought the services of the men necessary to handle it. In the cabin, Hugh Wilton talked to Duke Edward, talked of Montfort, of King Harold, of the impending battle. He was shocked at Duke Edward's appearance. The man was but a shadow of his former self. Gaunt, haggard, pale, he looked as though he still stood on the threshold of death. But despite that, the character of the men still showed in his flashing eyes.

"A day to England, two more to Mercia," he said to Hugh Wilton. "You must get to King Harold as soon as we land. Given a week I will bring him ten thousand fighting men. Make him delay the battle, no matter what the cost."

And Hugh nodded. Someone brought him food and he ate it wolfishly, got up and staggered to the deck. The sea was choppy and rough and his stomach, unaccustomed to food, began churning up and down.

Oliver joined him and Wilton asked sharply, "When will we reach the coast?"

"Not before tomorrow dawn, so the fishermen tell me."

"We must get there sooner. There is no time to lose."

Oliver Sweyn looked judiciously at his friend and a faint smile touched his lips. "I know how you feel, Hugh," he said slowly, "A great impatience is driving you, Hugh. It is also driving me. But this ship will go no faster than the winds can carry it."

Hugh Wilton knew it was true. There was nothing for him to do until the ship reached England. He moved forward to the prow, stared out to the west. A salt spray dashed against his face but he was unaware of it. He sat down and leaned his head against the bulwark and began thinking of England; and fell suddenly asleep.

IT WAS dark when he woke and there was a blanket over his shoulders. He threw it back, sat up. The sky above him was clear and the wind had gone down. The boat hardly seemed to be moving. Near him, there was a vague movement in the darkness. Hugh Wilton glanced around. Not far from where he had been lying stood the slender figure of Thyra. Her hood had dropped back; and she was looking out across the sea.

"What do you here?" Hugh Wilton asked suddenly.

The girl turned to face him. "Your friend brought me on board from the coach," she answered. And the tone of her voice told him nothing. She sounded neither angry nor wholly indifferent.

A deep frown creased Wilton's forehead. He recalled having told Oliver to take care of the women and he guessed that Oliver could think of nothing else to do but bring them on board.

"Where are you taking me?" asked the girl.

"To England," Hugh Wilton replied.

"Where you plan to join your King and where Duke Edward plans to raise the men of Mercia against the invasion of William of Normandy?"

"Aye, that is it."

"But to what purpose, Hugh Wilton? Did not Edward the Confessor promise the English crown to William of Normandy?"

"Perhaps. But the Witan, the English council, gave it to Harold of Wessex."

"Think you that William of Normandy would make a poor king? He is honest

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just, wise. I know all that from what my father has said."

"But he is not a Briton."

"And who are your Britons? Are not many of them Danes, just as William of Normandy?"

Again Hugh Wilton frowned. He was silent for a moment and when he looked around, the girl was gone. She was back in a moment, however, bringing him bread and meat and a flagon of wine; and at the sight of the food, Hugh Wilton's hands trembled and he realized suddenly how hungry he was.

Mumbling his thanks, he reached for the food. Thyra knelt down beside him, watched him eat. And after a while she said quietly, "You are much like your father. I remember him well. That axe you have used to be his, didn't it?"

Hugh Wilton nodded.

"It seems so heavy that I wonder that you can swing it."

A faint smile touched Hugh Wilton's lips. "It is an axe which has been long in our family. A man named Caedmon forged it in the time of the first great English king, Alfred. And it is said that the strength to wield it comes not from the man but from the axe itself."

"You would use it in defense of King Harold."

"Aye."

The girl stared out to the west, toward the still hidden English shore. And after a long time she said slowly, "Hugh Wilton, I would not have you change sides, even though you might meet my father on the field of battle. A man must hold true to what he believes, no matter what the cost. I could not help you come to England. So long as I could, I had to try to keep you from coming. But since I could not do that there is something that I would tell you."

"What would you tell me?"

"Only this. That if William of Normandy conquers he will become an English king. As Duke of Normandy, he owes allegiance to King Philip of France. That is one reason you oppose him, I know. But you need have no fears along that line."

"Why do you say that?"

"Because my father says it, my father who was sent by the French king to help him. And my father knows."

"But why do you tell me this?"

Again the girl was silent for a moment. Then again speaking slowly, she said, "I tell you this, Hugh Wilton, because I have a feeling that you will fail to arrive in England in time to accomplish what you desire. I tell you because I believe that William of Normandy will defeat the English king."

"Never!"

The girl shrugged. "And if he does?"

"There will still be those of us to fight him."

"And lose your lives as outlaws or rebels."

A STRANGE, uneasy feeling came over Hugh Wilton. The assurance in the girl's voice was a thing he couldn't overlook. A sudden, deep bitterness swept over him. He had on this boat a man who could raise all Mercia to England's defense, yet if that man didn't get to Mercia in time to raise his army, it would avail them nothing. He stared out into the darkness ahead, scowling.

Thyra leaned forward, moved the blanket so that it was around his shoulders, and suddenly, for a reason which he couldn't understand, he was sharply aware of her presence and of the fact that she was a woman, beautiful, desirable and of a proud and noble line. It occurred to him to wonder what their fate might have been could their second meeting have come about under other conditions.

He leaned back, closed his eyes and smiled. And once more, then, he dropped off to sleep. Thyra moved closer to him, rearranged the blanket so that it covered him more completely. And when he turned restlessly in his slumber she lifted his head and rested it in her lap and ran her fingers through his long, blond locks of hair, smoothing it back from his fore-

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head. Oliver Sweyn came forward once and saw them and tiptoed quietly away and left them alone.

Thus passed the night.

IV

A LIGHT, chilly fog thickened the air during the early hours of the morning and as the boat drew near to the English coast, Hugh Wilton, with the blanket still around his shoulders, turned to Oliver.

"What point is this?" he asked.

"It is near the town of Hastings, so the fishermen say."

"Duke Edward?"

"He still sleeps. I had not thought to waken him until the last moment. It will be a long, hard journey to Mercia."

Hugh Wilton nodded. He said slowly, "You will go with him, Oliver. You will find a coach. There is no one who can handle horses like you."

"And what of yourself, Hugh?"

"I go to find King Harold. To persuade him to delay the battle until the men to Mercia can arrive."

The boat was now closer to the shore and back away from the cove toward which they were headed, Hugh Wilton could now make out the cluster of houses which he knew must comprise the village of Hastings.

Oliver turned back to the cabin and a few minutes later the ship hove to and several of the fishermen lowered a small boat.

Wilton moved that way and Oliver came from the cabin, half carrying the gaunt figure of Duke Edward. Together, they got the man into the boat.

"We will go with you," said a voice at Hugh Wilton's shoulder.

He glanced around. Thyra and the red-faced woman were standing near him.

Hugh Wilton shrugged. He knew from the reports that Oliver had received from England, that William of Normandy's army was in the territory near this part of the coast. That meant that the girl's father could not be far away. It would not be difficult, he decided, for her to find him and he knew that Count Henri would see that his daughter and her friend would be safe.

The two women got into the boat and Hugh and Oliver Sweyn followed them. No one met them when they landed and as they reached the village it at first seemed deserted. A gangling youth, however, suddenly came running around the corner of one of the houses and Hugh Wilton hailed him.

The youth stared with wide open mouth at the three men and two women, at the great axe on Hugh Wilton's shoulder. He came closer to where they stood.

"Where is everyone?" Hugh Wilton demanded. "Where can we get a coach, horses?"

The youth blinked. "You are going to the battle?"

"Battle?" Hugh Wilton cried.

"Aye. On Senlac Hill."

Hugh Wilton felt himself gripped by apprehension. Perspiration broke out all over his body. "What battle, lad? What are you talking about?" he demanded.

The youth made no answer. As though suddenly recalling some mission which the sight of these men had interrupted but which was very important, he swung around and started running on down toward a house closer to the shore.

Hugh Wilton called after him but the youth did not stop and looking over at Oliver Sweyn, he asked, "What think you that he meant?"

Oliver Sweyn shook his head. "I do not know. There is a hill just beyond here known as Senlac Hill. It is high and could be well defended. If King Harold were ready to give battle to the forces of William of Normandy, he could pick no better place."

"But he must not yet give battle."

Oliver made no answer. There was no answer to be made. Hugh Wilton heard Duke Edward muttering, "If I but had a week. If I could but get to Mercia a full ten thousand men could I rally."

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Thyra was standing near the duke. Hugh glanced at her and saw that her eyes were resting on him and that there was something of sadness in her expression. He recalled abruptly the prediction she had made on the boat the night before, the prediction that William of Normandy would be victorious.

DOWN the road which angled off to the west came a galloping horse and rider. The rider was swaying from side to side and as he drew closer Hugh Wilton could see that his whole side was stained with blood. Suddenly he lost his seat and fell heavily to the ground. The horse stopped, looked back, snorted and moved a little to one side.

Hugh Wilton looked at Oliver. "I'll take that horse," he said sharply. "Even yet it may not be too late to get King Harold to withdraw. Can you get Duke Edward to Mercia?"

"I'll get him there, Hugh."

"Horses? A coach?"

"I'll get horses and a coach if I have to take them away from William of Normandy himself."

Duke Edward drew himself up. "Find the king," he said to Hugh Wilton. "Tell him that I am here. Tell him that within a week, all Mercia will be marching to support him."

There was a ring in Duke Edward's voice, a note of challenge which straightened Hugh Wilton's shoulders. He glanced over at Thyra and he suddenly recalled the moment of his wakening that morning. His head had been in Thyra's lap and her hands had been warming his shoulders. The strange sweetness of that moment came back to him now. He took a step toward the girl, stopped. The shifting of the wind brought to his ears the din of clashing arms and the faint, distant shouting of many voices.

Abruptly, then, Hugh Wilton swung around. He started running toward the horse. It seemed to him that he heard Thyra's voice calling his name but he wasn't sure. He reached the horse, seized its bridle, threw himself into the saddle, wheeled around and started up the road.

ON THAT morning of the fourteenth of October in the year 1066, King Harold of England inspected the stockade and trench with which his men had fortified Senlac Hill. On Telham Mound and on the higher ground around Hastings, the Norman forces were encamped. All night long he had watched their campfires and with the coming of the dawn he had known that they would attack.

In the position he had chosen he felt a deep confidence. To the right the ground below the hill was marshy and impassable. To the left and on the hill were grouped his men. Staunch warriors they were. At Stamford Bridge near York a few weeks before they had turned back the forces of King Hardrada of Norway and now they would repel this other invasion, unless—

A momentary doubt crept into King Harold's mind. He had lost many men at Stamford Bridge and were their force but a little stronger—

"Shall I plant the standard here, Sire?" asked a voice.

King Harold looked around. Near him stood a soldier who carried a banner displaying the Golden Dragon of Wessex.

"Yes," King Harold answered. "Plant the banner here. I will not leave this place until victory is ours."

Norman trumpets shattered the quiet of the early morning hour and through the gray dawn King Harold could see the Norman battle line forming below the hill. He watched quietly as they began their advance.

Before them rode a minstrel, tossing his sword high into the air and dexterously catching it as it fell. He was singing as he rode forward. The minstrel's name was Taillefer and the song he sang was the Song of Roland.

Nearer and nearer drew the minstrel and closer and closer came the line of Norman foot soldiers. A flight of arrows clouded the sky and hoarse, shouting voices

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broke in on the minstrel's song. Suddenly, then, the two forces met. Swords flashed in the early dawn and shield butted against shield. The minstrel's song was stopped by death.

From the left a charge of Norman horsemen was broken by the stockade on Senlac Hill and from behind that stockade poured English knights with sword, axe and spear.

WHILE still far off, Hugh Wilton saw the battle array. On the crest of the hill he could distinguish King Harold's banner and in the Norman ranks he could make out the pennant of the house of Anjou and flags from Breton and Tuscany. He made for the hill, whipping his horse mercilessly. And coming up behind the English ranks he threw himself to the ground and pressed forward. Beyond the stockade lay a score of silent, motionless figures. Here and there, wounded men were crawling and dragging themselves away from the field of battle.

King Harold stood near his banner, a bared, bloody sword in his hand. Hugh Wilton reached his side, bowed, straightened.

"I have just come from Normandy, Sire," he said bluntly. "Duke Edward came with me. He is now on his way to Mercia. In a week he can raise ten thousand men. In a week—"

"In a week," said King Harold, "we will not need them."

Hugh Wilton bit his lips. He knew something of King Harold's pride, of his stubbornness. He started to speak again but the king interrupted him.

"By nightfall we will have pushed the Normans back into the sea. What matters it that we are outnumbered? We will let them break their forces against this stockade, against our position here. Then, when they are weary, we will advance."

"But if we waited for the men of Mercia—"

"I have not the patience to wait," answered King Harold.

Someone hurrying up demanded the king's attention and Hugh Wilton turned away. The sense of failure was strongly upon him. He bit his lips, stared out over the Norman lines. How Harold could possibly defeat so great a number he couldn't see.

Again the Norman lines charged forward. Hugh Wilton's lips tightened, he straightened up. No matter what the result of this issue, here was his place at the side of his king. He lifted *Bretwalda* and with the others he rushed to repel the attack.

All track of time was lost by those defending the hill. The early fog thinned and the sun came out bright. It rose high in a cloudless sky. Again and again the Norman attack was broken and again and again their forces were hurled back. The dead and dying cluttered up the brow of the hill and the shrieking cries of the wounded beat monotonously against his eardrums. His axe was splashed with blood. In the press of one charge he saw Otto de Balse, the Tuscan, go down before the sword thrust of the king. And then, quite suddenly, he caught sight of Roger Montfort.

Tall, thin, and clothed in a heavy, protecting armor, Roger Montfort stood behind a group of the Norman warriors, urging them on with loud, sharp commands. His face was pale and tight with emotion. His sword was bright, unsullied.

A loud shout tore from Hugh Wilton's throat at the sight of him. He pressed forward, slashing from left to right with his great axe. Men went down or gave way before him. A few moments before he had felt the pressure of a heavy fatigue but he did not feel it now. There, beyond the fighting, securely protected, stood the man who, above all others, would be responsible for the defeat of the English if they lost this battle. Sure of William of Normandy's success, he was showing himself definitely on the side of the invader.

BEFORE the fury of Hugh Wilton's advance, against the great slashing cuts of his axe, no man could stand. Hardly

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had his shout died out before he had fought his way to where Roger Montfort stood. And Roger Montfort saw him, saw him and trembled with fear.

Hugh Wilton said not a word to the man. He swung *Bretwalda* above his head, saw Montfort bring up his sword in a desperate attempt to block the blow.

William of Normandy, his helmet off, his voice sharp and clear, was rallying his men. Archers and men with crossbows were hastening closer. From the left came a charging line of horsemen. And suddenly the fury of the battle there at the crest of Senlac Hill reached a fever pitch.

The crucial moments had come. In a final, desperate venture, William of Normandy was throwing the full strength of his forces against the English.

A wild, fierce cry came from Hugh Wilton's throat. He brought his great axe down with a vicious swing. Roger Montfort's sword was like a straw in its way. The blade of the axe crashed against his helmet and sliced it way through the steel as though it had been paper, sliced through flesh and bone to the man's shoulders and drew away as the body fell to the ground.

For a moment, then, Hugh Wilton rested. All about him raged the battle. He saw King Harold wielding his long sword in the midst of a score of Normans, heard the shout of the French troops as they poured into the fight. He turned, fought his way to the king's side. A cry of horror came from a man near him and Hugh Wilton saw King Harold stagger back, the shaft of an arrow protruding from his eye.

Slowly, wearily, the king's figure sank to the ground. Hugh Wilton stared down at him. Death had followed the flight of that arrow he knew full well, death for the king, death for the hopes of England. A great bitterness seized him. All about he could hear men shouting news of what had happened and all about him, men were fleeing.

Hugh Wilton's hands tightened on the bloodstained handle of the axe.

All throughout the fight he had been sustained by the thought that if they met defeat here, they could still rally with the men of Mercia and engage the invaders again. But now that possibility was gone. The king was dead. There was none left to lead a fight against William of Normandy.

With a score of others, Hugh Wilton gathered around the king's body. Against them pressed the forces of the enemy.

The man to his right went down under the thrust of a spear and the man to his left fell before the slashing blow of a sword. Grimly, desperately Hugh Wilton held his ground, the dead piling high around him.

A tall, gaunt figure pressed forward and through the haze which was gathering over his eyes Hugh Wilton suddenly recognized the man as Count Henri d'Anjou. Thyra's words came back to him. *"Even though you might meet my father on the field of battle. . . ."*

He swung *Bretwalda* aloft, hesitated. Pain exploded in his head and a sudden, yawning darkness reached out for him.

V

ALL was lost. . . . Over and over in the delirium of the days which followed that thought outweighed every other thought which came to his mind.

All was lost!

Even as his wounds healed and as his body grew stronger and his mind clearer, there was nothing else of which to think. Where he was he didn't know. By what chance he was still alive he didn't even care to guess. An old man and woman were taking care of him and from their conversations he knew what had happened. Completely victorious on the hill at Senlac, William of Normandy had marched by Canterbury upon London.

Hastily formed opposition to him had been crushed. The widow of Edward the Confessor had surrendered, the Bishops had submitted, London had fallen. And on Christmas day at Westminster, Harold of Normandy had been crowned King of England by Archbishop Eldred.

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All was lost!

A Norman, a foreigner, ruled the land. A man who was a vassal of the King of France.

Outside the small cottage where Hugh Wilton lay, a coach stopped and a tall, gray-haired man descended from it and came up to the door. He talked for a moment to the old couple who had looked after Hugh Wilton and some money exchanged hands. Then, passing through the door, the man closed it after him and looked down on Hugh Wilton.

"You are better, they tell me," he said slowly. "In fact, the old man said that you could leave."

Hugh Wilton looked up at the Count d'Anjou. "And to what purpose?" he demanded sharply.

The man pondered him a moment, and then he smiled slightly.

"I thought that you might like to go back to your home in Mercia."

Hugh Wilton made no answer. He must owe his life, he decided, to this man who stood above him. Undoubtedly it had been Count d'Anjou who had had him carried away from the battlefield and who had provided for his care here. He glanced over to the corner of the room. There stood the axe *Bretwalda*. The engravings on the handle, he suddenly recalled, were supposed to read: *To him who holds Bretwalda will come great sorrow and great joy, great defeat and great victory.*

A thin smile touched his lips. He stood up and said slowly, "Why should I go back to Mercia?"

The blue eyes of the Frenchman rested on him kindly. "You no doubt feel bitter, Hugh Wilton, but all is not so bad as you think. When King Philip of France agreed to help William of Normandy I said to him that once William of Normandy was named King of England, he would forget his allegiance to France. I was right. Though he is a Norman, he has become an English king. Perhaps he will even make a good king. But whether good or bad, this is still England and if you love your country as I love mine you will still find ways of serving it."

Hugh Wilton lifted his head. He felt suddenly ashamed of his bitter thoughts. In the Frenchman's words he could see a deep truth. No matter who the ruler might be, England was still England and would always have need of those men who loved her.

"Your friend, Oliver Sweyn, and Duke Edward await you in Mercia," Count Henri continued. "I am on my way back to France."

"Back to France?"

The Frenchman smiled. "You are not the only one who has lost a battle. In the past few days I have lost two. One to William of Normandy who is now William of England. I tried to remind him of what he owed the French king. The other battle I lost to my daughter."

"To your daughter?"

Hugh Wilton stared at him and then repeated slowly:

"Yes. I had wanted her to return with me to France. She insists that she is staying here. Hugh Wilton, can I leave her in England with safety?"

As Count Henri d'Anjou spoke the door opened and standing there, outlined against the clear sunlight of the early afternoon, Hugh Wilton saw the girl Thyra. A faint smile trembled on her lips. Her deep blue eyes were steady.

Hugh Wilton felt born anew in the breathless moment which followed. "Aye, you may leave here here," he answered. "You may leave her here in safety."

He walked forward, then, and took Thyra into his arms. Count Henri went on talking but Hugh Wilton didn't hear a word that he said. His thoughts were racing ahead down the years which were before him.

Another story of *Bretwalda* and of Britain's kings and heroes will appear in an early issue

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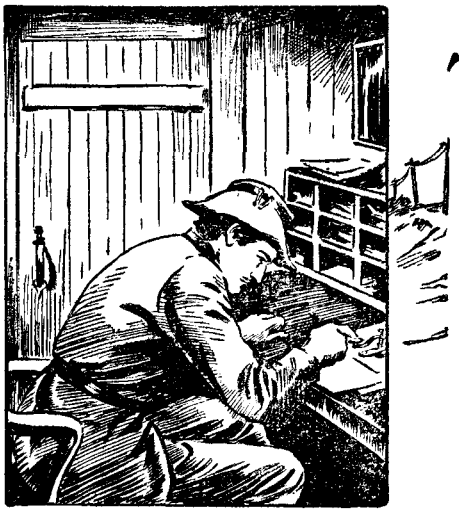

The Judas Tree

By
RICHARD SALE

Author of "The Rebels Are Coming!", "Him and General Lee," etc.

Take a message, Johnny Reb—send it to the Union Lines where Grant is waiting; and don't let your hand tremble on the key, for even if it means your death, Virginia's fate is hanging on those dashes and those dots

THERE are many strange sights in Virginia, strange, moving, and wonderful. There are the baroque Cyclops Towers, formations of rock rising raggedly into the sky like something out of the Mesozoic Era; and near New Market, the gorgeous caverns underground, without end, honeycombing themselves deep into the red clay beneath Virginia; and the blue grottos, near Harrisburg, where Confederate soldiers successfully hid themselves from General Hunter when he raided the Shenendoah Valley; House Mountain, an American Fuyjiyama on the route to Clifton Forge; the grave of Stonewall Jackson in Lexington, Harper's Ferry, Appomattox, the Wilderness. . . .

But the strangest of all sights is a tree on the northern outskirts of a small town near Richmond, named Truman Gap.

Truman Gap, today, merely exists, but at one point during the War between the States, it was so important that the South might have won because of it.

When you approach Truman's Gap, coming down from Washington, you spot the tree instantly. It is a shaggy monster, twisted and grotesque, intertwined like the agony tree in Gethsemane. It is still remarkably healthy and it hangs over the roadway so that you pass beneath its very branches. They are long and thick and not too high, those first ones. Very easy to sling a rope up over that crooked one and hang a man by the neck until he is dead.

You are impressed with this before ever you read the identification sign. There is something ominous about that tree, it can be felt. It was built for death. Nothing soft or pretty about it. Monstrous, grim, and hard.

The marker says simply:

THE JUDAS TREE
General Robert E. Lee Visited this Spot in July, 1865, to Erase Virginia's Shame and Sorrow.

Well, there you are. There's a story behind it, and the sign, instead of helping you out, only whets your appetite. What's the answer? What was Virginia's shame and sorrow? Why did General Lee visit the spot? You'll look it up in your history book, first chance you get.

It isn't in your history book.

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If the South had won the war, it might have been. But the South lost, and many wrongs, although righted, were lost in the turbulent years which folowed Appomattox.

The most that you'll find—in almost any biography of Lee—is that biographers, considering the months after the war closed, all say that the strangest act General Lee ever performed was to make the journey to Truman Gap on his white charger, Traveler, to lay a wreath against the bark of the Judas tree, and then to go up Main Street to the small cemetery there, and place one of his own medals upon the grave of Townsend Parker, of Truman Gap, openly known to have been hung for espionage in the service of the Union Armies under U. S. Grant. The historians, compiling data on Lee, overlook data the possible facts about Parker, and so the truth fails to come out.

I happen to know it for one reason. Captain Elbert Tomas, A.B., Ph. D., was my father's instructor in natural sciences at Washington College during the years following the war. My father enrolled as a student the very year that General Lee died in office as president.

And, through his friendship with Captain Tomas, my father heard the tale. For Tomas and Lee had unraveled it between them, the only two men who could have. And they knew the answer to the Judas Tree.

NOBODY knows exactly when. The wilderness campaign at fever heat now, for those long months of bloodshed and fighting were beginning to tell. Lee and the Army of Virginia falling back toward Richmond, and Grant stolidly pursuing, sacrificing lives, but pursuing. Grant, the butcher, in those days. Even his own compatriots shuddered at the loss of life.

We only know that it was previous to Appomattox, perhaps previous to the fighting at Spottsylvania Courthouse. But we aren't sure. We only knew that this all happened in the spring of '65.

Lieutenant Townsend Parker was young,

"Will Lee fall back on Lynchburg?" . . . "No, no!" the answer came

handsome, a member of the 77th Pennsylvania Volunteers. His record showed that he had joined up before Antietam. (This is the Northern name for it, not Sharpsburg, as a Confederate would say.) He had studied at Virginia Military Institute before the war, and he soon had a commission in the Union Army.

One night in March, when the Union Armies had reached a point some five miles north of Sparksston, a Confederate soldier, apparently confused in the battle, wandered into the northern lines.

A sentry challenged him, nearly shot him, captured him instead and brought him before the staff. He was questioned at great length by General Grant and the others, and gave out much false information. At length, the staff desisted, and the prisoner was ordered returned to the rear for imprisonment for the duration of war.

He said his name was Walter Kane.

"My brother was killed at Gettysburg," Kane told them. "My ma heard about it from a Yank lieutenant by the name o' Parker. Townsend Parker. He wrote my ma. Ma made me promise if I ever found him to thank him, would I ask about my brother Joe. Yuh don't have a Lieutenant Townsend Parker around heah, do yuh, sirs?"

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General Grant, despite the newspaper talk to the contrary in New York and Washington, was a very human man, and he ordered Lieutenant Parker brought in. "Good evening, Lieutenant," Grant said. He sat on a folding chair, his clothes in disarray, his black beard untrimmed, a short cigar, unlighted, in the corner of his mouth, and he looked a little weary. "This man asked for you."

Lieutenant Parker looked at the rebel with quiet contempt. "Indeed, sir," he said. "I haven't had the pleasure of his acquaintance. He wears the wrong uniform."

"Don't be a stuffed shirt," General Grant rumbled. "His name is Kane and he says his brother died in your arms at Gettysburg."

Lieutenant S. O. Parker's face softened. "That's quite true, General. I remember that boy very well. He couldn't have been more than eighteen."

"That was Joe. A little blondie. He wasn't built for war," Kane said slowly and sadly.

"You wrote the mother?" Grant asked.

"Yes, sir. The boy asked me to. Gave me his papers and asked if I would let his mother know how he died. I dropped her a line or two, sir, telling few details, merely saying that he had died like a hero. He was such a pleasant lad, it seemed little enough to do."

"Uh-huh," Grant said. "Well, Lieutenant, this man is being returned for duration to the rear. Suppose you have a talk with him. He wants to know more about his brother and to thank you. There's no harm in that, as I see it. I'll hold you responsible for him, and when you're finished, turn him over to the guard."

"Yes, sir." Clicked heels, a salute, and Walter Kane followed Lieutenant Parker outside.

AN HOUR later, Lieutenant Parker returned. "General Grant, sir, I think I have information."

"What is it, son?"

"During my conversation with the prisoner, he let something drop without realizing it. He said that maybe we'd get a little surprise when we reached Truman Gap."

General Grant consulted his maps, the other officers joined him, and the table buzzed. "As I see it," Grant replied heavily, "we aren't going to reach Truman Gap. We're driving Lee south toward Richmond and we're driving him faster than he can retreat. Truman Gap is this one-horse town to the west of Spottsylvania. The army isn't going over there."

Lieutenant Parker nodded. "But the prisoner's words indicated that instead of protecting Richmond, Lee will cut west to Truman Gap."

"What for? Outflank us? He can't do that without more men or more ammunition."

"That's just it, sir. Begging your pardon, General, I'd like to find out what he meant."

Grant stared and removed the cigar, then replaced it and sunk down in the chair so that his head merged with his body and no sight of neck in between. "You're from Pennsylvania, aren't you?"

"Yes, sir."

"And you want to be a spy for me. Lieutenant, I appreciate the motive, but the'd catch you quicker'n' a hog smells corn meal." Grant rapped the table. "You don't talk like a reb. Your accent would give you away. You don't know the country there. You'd be lost. There's no point in getting yourself killed. We'll have this war won before June and I'm in no hurry. That prisoner might have been talking to impress you. They get bitter when they get captured."

"Begging your pardon, sir," Parker replied with a faint smile, "I studied at the Virginia Military Institute before the war, and ah reckon ah got just as good an accent as them Johnny rebs out chonder theah."

Grant sat up, looking amused. "Go on, Lieutenant. Give me more of that."

"Yas suh. The truth is, General, mah roommate at VMI lived in Truman Gap,

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and ah had occasion t'visit with him fo' two weeks durin' a vacation, and ah know that town right well, and it seems to me there was talks of ammunition dumps theah, even 'fore the war."

"That's enough," Grant snapped. "You really know the town?"

"Yes, sir. And I'm certain there was an arsenal in the town when I visited with him. It is quite conceivable that Lee will strike to the west for bullets and cannon, outflank our right wing and come in from behind us. He could cut us in half, sir, with the proper weapons. Truman Gap is a hard place to attack, sir, it would require tenacity of the kind for which, begging your pardon, General, you are noted. It would be costly. Perhaps General Lee is counting on that."

"It's possible," Grant said good humoredly. "You think you could get through?"

"I do, sir."

"And if you're caught, you know the answer."

"Shot at sunrise, I suppose."

Grant shook his head. "Hung most likely. When an army gets short on bullets, it prefers the rope. That doesn't waste so much ammunition. . . . Well, if you are confident of your own success, very well. I would like to be aware of any traps in store for me, it might save time."

That night, Lieutenant Parker changed into mufti, made his arrangements for the transmitting of information to GHQ, and slipped out into the darkness toward the south, across the lines.

FOR a Union espionage agent, Townsend Parker was singularly careless. He was captured by a reb scout no more than an hour after he had crossed the lines. Singularly too, he was captured close to general headquarters of the Virginia army, and upon being seized, asked at once to be taken to General Lee.

General Lee took one look at Townsend Parker and said, to his officers around, "Gentlemen, I must beg you to excuse me. I wish to retire to my tent and talk with this man."

The officers saluted, and General Lee retired to his tent, Townsend Parker following. Parker was stirred with strange emotion.

He was with the man he loved and revered above all others, and it frightened him to see how old Lee had grown. Not the hair and beard so much, white where they had been gray. But those melancholy eyes, so tired, and the multitude of fatigue lines which rutted Lee's face.

Within the tent, General Lee turned and silently embraced him, eyes moist. "My boy, my dear boy," he murmured. "You've been fortunate indeed. I don't know what we would have done without your help these past months."

Parker shrugged. "It's been so simple. I've been in no danger whatsoever. But for all my help—"

"I know," Lee said. "Grant is pushing us. Did you leave Kane in good spirits?"

Parker smiled. "Very good spirits. The trick worked to perfection. Captain Kane is an excellent actor, General. We managed to be alone and he told me that you wanted me over here, and he told me, just barely, the idea behind the trick of Truman Gap. General Grant was dubious, but he wanted the information. It was simple."

"Tell me." Lee said, "what does Grant say of me?"

"He says the war is won and that your army is beaten," Parker replied. "He says that Longstreet is as much your brain as Jackson was your right arm. He is a very human fellow, General, with much stubbornness and tenacity, and he'll pound at you forever if he must."

General Lee sighed. "He has a flare for truth, Grant has. For we are beaten. My men are worn out, Townsend."

"One rebel is worth ten Yankees," Parker said sharply.

"Many lives have been spent to prove that," Lee replied gravely. "But even you know that bullets equalize the power of men. Grant has more of them, he throws them away, he sacrifices them, but he gains ground. Need equipment, reinforcements, I need time."

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"What of the army in the south?"

"Ah, that's it, that's the one chance," Lee replied. "I intend to fall back, conserving my men as best I can. It is futile to make a stand for Richmond. It will have to fall. But if I can reach Lynchburg and entrench there until the southern army comes up and joins me, we could meet Grant and decisively defeat him. It might end the war."

"And if not?"

"Then I must strike my tent and give up my sword. I will not spill the blood of men to no avail. And it is fruitless fighting here, unless I can gain time. Supplies, food, arms, men, we need them all."

Townsend Parker did not look surprised. "I've suspected all this, sir. When the Wilderness campaign began, so long ago, I thought that the high command would relieve Grant. He threw away so many men. And when Lincoln did not, I thought then that Grant would wear out his army and that we would whip him. But reserves keep pouring in, and he says he'll fight it out that way if it takes every mother's son in Union territory."

"And we," said Lee sadly, "already have taken every mother's son. We have no more to throw in the breach. Still, there is one chance. We are beaten, and yet we are not. Consider on what a straw the game of chance can hang. Here we are defeated. At Lynchburg, I could bring Grant to his knees. It might end the war in our favor."

"How, sir?"

GENERAL LEE stared at him. "Townsend, does it seem strange to you? Both of us here, the fate of our cause depending upon just us two. Incredible. Years ago, I visited your father, while you played on the lawn, a little boy . . . And today—"

"The General's favorite spy." Parker smiled. "Thank you, sir."

"A man can trust such few friends," Lee said. "Very well, Captain Parker—"

"Lieutenant, sir." Parker grinned.

"I am speaking from the Virginian viewpoint, Captain," replied Lee. "The plan is simply this: You must persuade Grant, somehow, that we are striking west to Truman Gap where strong defenses have been erected, where ammunition is waiting, where heavy artillery is lined. Grant must believe we plan to stand or fall there. He must pull his divisions west to Truman Gap. That will give us time to fall back to the south and pause at Lynchburg. You know the heights there. Invincible. Better than Lookout Mountain.

"We can stand him off there and wait for the southern armies to elude Sherman and march north to join us. If we can crush Grant at Lynchburg, we can crush Sherman in the rear as soon afterwards as he makes it necessary."

"General Grant is a shrewd man," said Parker slowly. "I hope it will work. But it will have to be done well."

"I leave the doing to you. It's a dangerous task, Townsend, for you must remain a Northern spy. Grant has other spies among us, doubtless, even as you've been among their men. To keep the play intact, you must remain a Northern spy and act accordingly."

"Is there anyone at Truman Gap?"

"Captain Tomas is over there with a company to scout any attempt at flanking us. But I can't tell him, Townsend. I'm afraid of such information leaking out. I trust Tomas, but once a thing is told, it seems to spread, almost by thought.

"But that will be all right. I will send you to Tomas with a note that you are joining his company as a roving scout, under no orders except his own, and subject to my recall."

"I'm sure that will do well enough, General," Townsend Parker said. "Before I left Grant, we made arrangement to use the telegraph line along the Seneca branch line. The northern end is in Union hands. I was to sever the line at Truman Gap and use it to send messages at night by telegraph."

"I will facilitate that move as much as possible," Lee nodded. "Godspeed, my boy, and good luck. If this ruse works, there is

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every chance. If it fails, this command will surrender before it ever reaches Richmond. We stand or fall on the deception."

"I'll do my best, General," Parker said. "And as quickly as possible. I'll move out for Truman Gap at once."

IN 1870, five years later, sitting out under the trees in the campus of Washington College in the warm dusk of a spring evening, Captain Elbert Tomas told my father, "Parker arrived after midnight that night, came riding in on a black horse. He was a handsome lad, that one, a strapping big man. Over six feet tall, and his black boots looked like they went on forever from his foot to his hip. There was a twinkle in his eyes and his face was ruddy and he looked well fed.

"I thought he had a trace of Northern accent, but one could not be sure of that. His note from General Lee looked genuine, and when I checked with headquarters, it proved to be.

"Then came further orders for cutting the Seneca telegraph below Truman Gap, also that we were not to use the line as it was in Union hands north. Captain Parker knew all about the cutting of the line. I presumed he had been told by Lee.

"But he was well fed. I reckon I would never have been suspicious of him if it hadn't been for that. I reckon he would have lived to see the war end, either way them or us, if he hadn't looked so well fed.

"Y'see, my men hadn't had a square meal in months. It was the same in all the rebel army. And this boy rode in, bursting with health and looking fine. No privation, no thinness, no look of hunger in the eyes. The Union Armies had plenty of food. And so I watched him mighty sharp . . ."

. . . Townsend Parker was well aware that Captain Tomas was suspicious of him, but considering the weight of authority which he had brought with him: the Lee note, the severing of the Seneca telegraph southward, he did not worry. Certainly, he did not read Captain Tomas' mind. Tomas was a shrewd sharp man who was trying to understand how it might be possible for Parker to have hoodwinked General Lee.

To allay Tomas' suspicions, Captain Parker spent his first day constantly in Tomas' company, telling him news from the front. That was easy because Townsend Parker had an excellent picture of the battle lines from both sides, and Tomas could not help liking the frank and friendly soldier who had come out of the night into his command.

But on the second day, a dark cloud settled in Captain Tomas' mind once again, when the signal corps delivered to Captain Parker's quarters in the red brick house on Tulip Street full telegraphic equipment. Telegraph from field headquarters and Lee explained to Captain Tomas that Parker was to have absolute and secret use of this equipment, that Tomas was to give him every protection and courtesy, and that Parker's mission was to tap the Seneca line and try and listen in on possible Union information.

"How in blazes," Captain Tomas said, "can he listen in on Union information? True, the Federals have the north end of the line, but we hold the southern end. Even Grant isn't such a fool as to send messages from the north end to the south end. The only message that can travel on the telegraph is from north to south, or south to north, and I understood there was a war on and we weren't on speaking terms."

Townsend Parker had no idea that Tomas was so suspicious. If he had suspected, he might have told Tomas the whole plot and gained his help. But as it was, Parker felt he could not take the chance. Men were not always what they seemed.

For all he knew, Tomas could be a Union spy. He wasn't, of course, but he could be. After all, Grant would have swallowed his cigar if he knew that Townsend Parker of the 77th Pennsylvania Volunteers was a Virginian, a spy for the Confederate staff.

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THE third night, near midnight, Parker settled himself at the wireless key behind locked doors, hooked into the Seneca wire and proceeded to tap out messages. First he made contact with the Union end whose call name was QX. And having established communication, he tapped, "To General U. S. Grant from Agent P4. Truman Gap, Virginia . . . All well. Huge arsenal well stocked. Big guns going into line. Rumors of southern army on march here. Plenty of ammunition stored. . . . Believe Lee plans to fall back here and make stand. Will check thoroughly and be back tomorrow night. . . . P4."

At two A.M., two hours later, Parker went to the machine again and decided to whet Grant's appetite a trifle more. Speed was essential. Grant had to be made to take this hook with all possible speed, since the longer the fight went on in the east, the shorter the chances for the Confederacy grew.

So at two, Parker tapped, "QX . . . QX . . . QX . . ."

"QX calling . . . QX calling P4 . . . Go ahead . . ."

"To General U. S. Grant from Agent P4 . . . Have definite information. Saw orders. Commanding officer in this town warned to prepare for incoming troops. Troops will be withdrawn from west flank of Army of Virginia tomorrow and shifted here to Truman Gap. Main army to follow as orderly as possible, drawing your command after it. Trap here. Expect Lee plans to reach defenses here, be joined by Hood, make stand. Impregnable from east where you will come. Believe winning battle impossible if Lee reaches supplies and ammunition here. Will check on other routes and report tomorrow night. Stand by for me sooner in case information breaks. . . . P4."

"Wait a minute P4. . . . Don't sign off. Message for you here. To Agent P4 from General Grant. Your report contradicts that of Agent S1, at Falmouth. Are you certain of source? S1 reports Lee hoping to retreat to Lynchburg. Verify this. . . ."

The wire went silent.

"I reckon," Parker said quietly, "I've got to make it better. And Agent S1 whoever the devil he is, is a mighty smart man!"

Captain Tomas, next day, decided that he would do something to ease his own mind.

One man, alone, on an uninterrupted telegraph, so easily able to communicate with the enemy—it bothered him. Either Parker was a genius or a rascal. Captain Tomas resolved to learn which.

He had signal equipment hooked into the Seneca line for the entire fourth day and he stayed with the operator, waiting. No messages at all. He stayed with it that night too, up until midnight when, tired and weary of the entire thing, he quit.

And at midnight, Parker took to his telegraph key once more and tapped, "QX . . . QX . . . To General Grant from Agent P4. . . . Vanguard of Lee's troops arriving in Truman Gap. Have seen army orders. Lee definitely marching here to make stand. Plans to desert present front lines by tomorrow and entrench here. Suicidal if you follow from east. Best plan to attack Truman Gap at once, coming in front north. Weak saliant there, unprotected as yet. You could brush through and attack Lee's rear. Also capture his entire supply. Would end war with one stroke, I believe. Cannot help urging instant action before he entrenches or his position will be immovable. . . ."

"P4 . . . Calling P4 . . ."

"Come in QX."

"Agent S1 reports Lee retreating to Spottsylvania with sharp fighting. One of you is in error. . . ."

"Have seen orders signed by Lee himself." Parker tapped on, harassed and desperate. "Soldiers arriving. Action at Spottsylvania may be blind to draw you off. Attack imperative here to forestall union of Lee with southern army. . . ."

"All right, QX. . . ."

Townsend Parker realized that he was sweating. It had been touch and go. What

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did "All right QX" mean? Did it mean they agreed and would attack Truman Gap?

"I AWOKE near two o'clock," Captain Elbert Tomas wrote in his report of the tragedy, "and was seized with a desire to listen in on the wire again. I roused my operator and told him to turn on the electricity, and we listened.

"Presently, my operator told me there was a message and that it was coming from the Union end of the wire at Maryville, Virginia, which was Grant's base. 'Translate,' I said. 'Tell me what it says.'

"My operator listened for some time and then paled. 'They keep calling for Lieutenant Parker,' he said. '*Lieutenant* Parker! I said. So there it was, he was a lieutenant in the Northern army and a captain with us. Still I did nothing. I asked the operator to let me take over the headphones myself.

"I had had some telegraph training and I was able to read the dots and dashes whereas I could not send them, not being dexterous enough with the key. I listened and presently the following message arrived. 'General Grant thanks you heartily for your information on Lee's movements. You will be recommened for valorous service, Parker, when you return to your own lines here.'

"There was much more, but I turned the instruments over to my operator and told him I wanted a complete record. Then I left my rooms and went to the rooms of Captain Parker. He was sound asleep.

"I woke him and told him that he was under arrest. He did not seem surprised. 'You have made a grave mistake, sir,' he said. 'General Lee and I did not want it known, but since affairs have come to this, I must tell you that I am really a Confederate spy and I have been sending false reports on Lee's position.'

" 'Indeed,' I said. 'As to their falsity, tomorrow you may plead your case in a military court. And I needn't remind you of the penalty.'

" 'Look here,' he said. 'I'm telling you the truth. You've only to—'

"Only to what?" I asked.

"Nothing," he said.

"We tried him next morning and found him guilty and he was sentenced to be hanged.

"All that next day, congratulatory wires kept running in on the Seneca wire, and from their content, it was plain that the information he had sent to Grant was not false but true, for the dispatches mentioned that Lee was at Spottsylvania, as Parker had said he would be, and that Lee would not reach Lynchburg, as Parker said he was trying to. The evidence was conclusive. I did not show these dispatches to the prisoner.

"He was taken out to the great oak on the northern outskirts of the town. Mossback's oak. Before he did, he made one request.

" 'Gentlemen,' he said. 'I have reconsidered. Would you get in touch with General Lee as secretly as possible and tell him the circumstances?'

" 'I'm very sorry,' I said. 'But it is impossible to accede to the request. You are only playing for time.'

"He was hanged at seven P.M."

Captain Tomas' report ends there.

THEY slung the rope over a low thick branch. Around his neck the rope itched. It was coarse. The big knot touched taut behind his left ear. His hands were tied behind his back, and he sat upon his black horse.

The horse was nervous and pawed the ground, but a soldier held the bridle. There was no bandage on his eyes and he could see them all. They looked pale. None of them liked it. The tree was built for hanging. It was all twisted. Others had been hung here, no doubt of it, for this tree felt the agony in its contorted boughs and branches.

Townsend Parker had tossed all night. How simple it was to clear himself, he had thought. All he had to do was tell his true status. Even then, if they did not believe him, he would send to General Lee for confirmation, and it would be done.

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But there was the hitch. Which came first—Virginia or Townsend Parker? He had got his messages to Grant across. "All right P4. All right, P4." It sounded as if they believed him. They were ready to believe him. This very thing, his death at the hands of his own men, might swing it, might give to Grant a true sign. If he could only be certain that Grant knew of it, it might prove to Grant that he had been sending the truth, and an attack upon Truman Gap would follow, and Lee could escape southwestward.

He could picture Grant at the maps, comparing the information with the maps, wanting to attack, but wondering, wondering at the word of a single man. And then a flash, Lt. Parker hanged as a spy by the rebels. He could see Grant roar, "By God, they caught him! He must have been sending the truth! An attack then on Truman Gap from the north!"

And yet life was sweet.

He could not ask for Lee, he could not tell his status publicly. There were northern spies, there might be another in Truman Gap, or somebody to tell one that he had asked. And if that information crept back to Grant, that he was a Virginian who had sent information to lure Grant into a trap, that he was sponsored by Lee: everything was done. The trap would be gone. The plan would be gone. The Confederacy would crumble beneath its weary men.

"One chance . . ." General Lee had said. "If it works—"

Yes, yes, he thought, I can save my life easily enough, but it's my life against the South's.

Yet life could be sweet.

It wasn't easy to think of leaving Virginia, his home, his friends, the girl he had left behind. It was Gethsemane again and bitter gall.

"Look here, Captain," he asked Tomas. "If I should die, will you see that my death is telegraphed to General Grant at once?"

"A pleasure," Captain Tomas snapped. "And the same to any others he tries to send down here."

But when he sat upon the horse and felt the rope around his neck, Parker's nerve failed. Here was death, the lingering eternal darkness completely final. And he was young.

"Look here, Captain," he said from the horse. His voice trembled a little. Already he had a feeling that it was too late, he had delayed too long, that his freedom and life were beyond recall now. "Look here."

"Yes, Parker?"

"Gentlemen, I've reconsidered. Would you get in touch with General Lee as secretly as possible, and tell the circumstances?"

Only dimly he heard Tomas' negative reply. It was dusk, spring, and the sky in the west was old lavender, studded on the horizon with the crests of the Virginia hills, and the Blue Ridge mountains, dark brusque. "I die then," he thought. "For Virginia and for Lee . . ."

Some one laid a whip upon the horses rump, and the beast galloped off. But Townsend Parker remained behind, swinging to and fro like the pendulum of a clock, the Judas tree creaking faintly as his weight pulled upon the thick branch.

A BIOGRAPHER of Ulysses S. Grant had unconsciously explained this episode in several paragraphs. Townsend Parker himself said that Grant was a sharp shrewd man. Parker should not have underestimated his adversary, knowing that.

The particular biographer of whom I write, tells, in his work on Grant's life, the following instance of Grant's remarkable shrewdness.

"During the last days of the war," (the biographer writes), "a young lieutenant offered his services as a spy for Grant. Grant accepted and this young man disappeared into the southern lines. In two days, he performed the prodigious feat of severing a telegraph wire so that he could send messages to general headquarters. Not only that but he acquired a telegraph set.

"He began to pour information into Grant. If it had been true, he would have been a first-class hero, but it obviously

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conflicted with reports Grant had from his other scouts, and soon the thing became plain to Grant. While his other officers, harried and harassed, worried over the information which said that Lee was moving to a town where he would be impregnable, Grant pointed out to his men that for the Union to attack that town would be to let Lee, the Fox, get away clean.

"Once in the town, it would be a long hard march over the mountains, and by the time they accomplished that, Lee would have done just what the information hoped to accomplish: Pull the Union army off on a tangent while Lee retreated to Lynchburg and joined the southern army. So Grant ordered a straight advance on Richmond as before.

"But General Grant had no intention of letting the culprit get away clean. According to the memoirs of General McCauley, who was there at the time, Grant instructed his telegraph operator to work the Seneca line constantly in hopes that some southerner would overhear the messages. All day long, the operator sent incriminating messages, changing the information which the rebel spy had sent, sending truer information which Grant received from his scouts. A southern captain overheard this line of messages, arrested the young spy and he was hanged by his own men the following day. Grant was a shrewd man."

WILD RIVER

They said you couldn't harness the mighty Colorado—it was too big and too wild and too endlessly wicked. But what man can dream, man can find a way to do. . . . Here is the tremendous story of Boulder Dam, of the stone and sweat and steel and blood that the raging river devoured before they finally choked and harnessed her. And here, too, is the story of a cocky youngster who saw it all and at last could build his manhood on what the battle taught him. Don't miss this fascinating tale—the Blue Ribbon Novel of 1939, by
JOHN STROMBERG

STAY AS SWEET AS YOU ARE

The Angevines kept the candy shop in Four Corners. Miss Belle was pretty and plump, and she would always sneak out a few gumdrops to us kids. Miss Melina was sour and stingy. And there were things going on in the Angevine house that nobody even guessed about until one day somebody found a lot of arsenic in a batch of chocolate creams. . . . A complete novelet by
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THE GREAT GREEN SERPENT

Here is the fantastic pattern that linked a jungle witch-doctor, a shaven-headed American girl and an ultra candid camera with a normal young man, who had looked into the black heart of the unknown. An unusual novelet by
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COMING IN NEXT WEEK'S ARGOSY—May 20th

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Overman's gun was leveled, and still Chet did not reach for his own

Rider of the Rifle Rock

By BENNETT FOSTER

CHAPTER XIX

FOLLOW THE CROOKED-HORNED COW

CHET and Clyde Stevens left the wagons early the next morning, before there was a hint of dawn in the sky. They carried cold food and two canteens with them, and as they got ready Joe French remarked to Chet:

"Looks like a regular war party. All you need is the paint."

Chet was putting Joe's rifle into the scabbard on his saddle. "An' we likely won't see a damned thing," he agreed. "I wonder how long this foolishness will last."

"There's no tellin'," Joe answered. "Stevens is hard headed an' stubborn as a mule. Well, good luck, Chet. I hope you either see 'em or Stevens gets fed up today."

"So do I," Chet said emphatically. "So long, Joe."

He and Stevens rode out into the blackness. By the time the east was light they were nearly to the rough country and before full daylight had come they were on a bench above the little park country where the crooked-horned cow and her calf grazed.

"There's a tank down below at the end of the park," Chet said as he tied his horse in the middle of a piñon thicket. "They water there. We can lay up here an' watch 'em."

Stevens agreed, and so, a good rifle's shot above the park, they settled down to wait.

It was foolishness, Chet thought, just a plain waste of time, and as the day wore along he was sure of it. For hours neither

The first installment of this five-part serial, herein concluded, appeared in the Argosy for April 15

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of the men spoke, but toward the middle of the afternoon, Stevens broke his silence.

"You think this is damned foolishness, don't you?" he asked abruptly. "It ain't. I've done this before. You wait long enough an' keep quiet enough an' things will happen. I hate to spend the time myself an' I hate to take you off the work an' leave Joe short-handed. But it's got to be done. One time in the Rangers, another fellow an' me laid out five days. We caught the man we were lookin' for. It just takes time an' patience."

"Suppose they don't come for these cattle?" Chet asked. "Suppose they get suspicious an' don't get here?"

"We'll try awhile an' see," Stevens returned.

He relapsed into silence after that and Chet lay watching the country below. As evening approached, Chet began to yawn. He was tired and sleepy. Evening stretched itself out to sundown and the afterglow.

"You want to go back to the wagon?" Stevens asked.

"Is there any use of stayin' here?" Chet answered.

"Go back an' bring some grub in the mornin'," Stevens said. "I'll stay here."

"There's still light," Chet began.

"They're comin' in below us!" Stevens spoke suddenly in a harsh whisper. "Get the horses!"

Down below in the dusk of the park, Chet saw movement. There was something happening in the park. A man on horseback came through the trees at the edge. Two others joined him, pausing to look over the open ground before them.

"The horses!" Stevens whispered fiercely. Chet slipped back from the rim toward the clump of piñons.

He had the horses untied and out of the trees when Stevens joined him. "They're throwin' the cattle together," Stevens said. "We'll meet 'em at the lower end when they start to drive 'em out. Throw down on 'em, Minor, an' if they try to make a fight of it you better shoot first."

Chet nodded, his eyes narrowed down, his mouth tightly set.

STEVENS was climbing into his saddle. Chet also mounted. They rode off toward the east, circling the park, working down into the little neck that formed the exit from the opening.

They had almost reached the neck when something went wrong. In the park a horse nickered, long and shrill. Stevens' mount tossed his head to answer, and Stevens jerked the horse's head down. Chet had leaned forward, reached for his horse's head to check any attempt at whinnying, when Stevens went past him. The rancher had spurred his horse as he jerked the reins, and the animal lunged forward now.

The lunge brought Stevens into the open where he could see. He yelled to Chet, "Come on," and spurred forward. Chet, coming into the opening, could see cattle bunched against the ridge, and beyond the cattle, riders in a hurried retreat. Chet, too, spurred forward.

Stevens' horse went down, stumbling for what seemed to Chet an immense distance and then falling. Stevens was thrown clear and Chet changed his course to reach the man. The riders beyond the cattle were going up the ridge now toward its top. Momentarily they were checked by the little rimrock of the ridge. Stevens had scrambled to his feet and he ran to his horse.

He caught the animal as it struggled up, but instead of trying to mount again, he tugged his rifle from its boot. Chet slid his horse to a stop beside Stevens', and as he did so the ranchman's rifle cracked, sharp as a whiplash.

It was poor shooting light, almost dark and impossible for a man to pull down his front sight into the notch of the rear. Perhaps that was an advantage, for the range was long. Stevens kept on shooting rapidly.

The riders had found the way up the rim now and were taking it. One man, two men, went over the rim and disappeared. But the third did not make it. Just as he reached the top, he lurched and fell heavily, unable to cling to his saddle horn. The horse lunged on up over the ridge, and the man came sprawling down, finally to

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lie motionless against the side of the rimrock.

"I got one of them!" Stevens' voice was harsh.

Chet suddenly was cold. There was a knot at the pit of his stomach and his mouth was dry.

Stevens walked to his horse. "I dropped him," he said. "Let's go up an' see who he is."

The two rode through the cattle. Up under the rim of the ridge they stopped and dismounted. Ben Revilla lay there, sprawled out. He was not trying to move, to get away. His eyes were open and he smiled as he recognized Chet.

Chet bent down over the man and opened his shirt. There was a small hole in the chest, just under the heart. Chet knew he could do nothing for Ben Revilla; no one could help him now.

CHET looked up at Stevens. The man's face was hard. "He's a cow-thief," Stevens said, as though answering something he saw in Chet's eyes. "You'd have done the same."

Chet knew that it was true and looked back at Ben. Revilla was still trying to smile. "Hallo, Chet," he said, his voice a whisper. "Pretty bad, *que no?*"

"Pretty bad, Ben," Chet answered soberly. He stood up then and said to Stevens: "One of us better make a swing an' see if we can find his horse before its clear dark. We're goin' to have to take him in."

"I'll go," Stevens said shortly.

The ranchman mounted and took the slope to the break in the rimrock. Searching for that break had stopped Ben Revilla. Chet bent down over the man again while rocks rattled from above as Stevens' horse scrambled up.

"Not long," Ben Revilla said. "I don't care, Chet."

There was no use in kidding Revilla. He might live an hour, or he might go immediately. He was bleeding internally, but there was very little blood from the wound.

"I'll build a fire," Chet said. "There ain't much I can do, Ben, but I can see with a fire." He moved away.

Chet came back with a big cedar limb and some smaller branches. Soon the dry wood crackled and a little blaze shot skyward.

"Chet!" Ben Revilla's voice was faint.

"Yes, Ben." Instantly Chet was at the man's side.

"You didn't shoot, did you Chet?"

"No, Ben. I didn't have time."

"I'm . . . kinda glad . . . it wasn't you."

"So am I."

"Tidd an' Frank Oakes an' me been stealin' 'em," Ben said. "We sold to Runkle. That's why I had the place at Amarilla Mesa. That's why Rosa was there."

"I'm sorry, Ben," Chet said.

"About me? Why? I don't care."

"About you, and about Rosa."

"Rosa was goin' to have a baby." Revilla's voice had sunk to a whisper. His eyes were closed as though that would conserve his strength. "She told Doc Laird when he came to see her. Told him whose baby it was, I mean. Doc said he'd make the baby's father take care of Rosa. He was a married man."

"When was that, Ben?" Chet asked.

"Before roundup started. Before I came with the wagon. Doc was killed right after Rosa told him. He came to see her an' he told her that the man would send some money. Doc was killed on his way home."

For a time only Revilla's hard breathing and the snap of cedar broke the silence. Then Ben spoke again.

"Chet?"

"Yes, Ben."

"One time I told you about that horse you were ridin' the day you got hurt?"

"Yes, Ben."

"I . . . told you about those rope marks on her rump?"

Faintly into Chet's mind came the recollection of that conversation so many months ago. "About there bein' a rope mark across the horse's rump?" he asked. "I remember."

"An' when you roped that bull, Powell

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Overman follow you too close. You yell at heem, you say."

"I did," Chet agreed. "He was too close."

"Powell hit your horse with a rope." Revilla whispered. "That make the horse jomp an' he was jerk' . . . down. I been thinkin' . . . 'bout that."

"Take it easy," Chet warned. "Take it easy, Ben. You—"

"I don't . . . care," Ben Revilla whispered. "I . . . don't care, Chet."

Then once more there was only Ben Revilla's harsh breathing.

Chet sat thinking. How badly Powell Overman must have wanted that place. How badly he must have wanted to succeed Eades Druerson. He had been willing to maim and to kill for a chance at the job. For Chet and Powell had been friends; they had worked together, shared their blankets, borrowed money from each other. But because of a job and a girl, Powell had chosen to forget all that. And afterward the job and the girl had driven him to hire a killer and to murder.

In Ben Revilla's throat a breath caught. He choked it out, gasped it away—his last breath. The rasping stopped now.

Chet put his hand on the man's chest. There was no movement, no heart beat there. Up above, the rocks rattled and Clyde Stevens' voice called. "How about it, Minor? I found his horse. Do you think we can get him in?"

Chet stood up. "Easy," he called, and his voice was hard. "All we got to do is pack him. He's dead!"

Stevens came down the trail leading two horses. He stopped, looked at the man on the ground, and then at Chet. "Well," he said uncertainly.

"Let's go," Chet said. "There's nothin' more that we can do here. It was Tidd an' Oakes with him. Let's go."

Later, when they were out of the roughs leading Ben Revilla's horse, with Ben across the saddle, Stevens broke the silence once more.

"He wasn't much good," he said. "Never was."

"No," Chet agreed, "Ben wasn't much good." He paused then and after a moment, concluded, "but he was a friend to me."

CHAPTER XX

SAND FOR POWDER

IT WAS necessary that Chet accompany Clyde Stevens with Revilla's body to Rifle Rock the next day. It meant a full six hours' trip on horseback, for they were fifty miles from Rifle Rock cross-country and more than that by road. So they decided to pick up fresh horses at the Screwplate.

"I'll go in with him," Chet told Joe French, "an' stay in town as long as I have to. Then I'll pull out an' head back. I'll likely make the Rock Springs camp by tonight an' come on in in the mornin'."

In a little less than three hours Chet and Stevens were at the Screwplate where they ran in fresh horses from the pasture, and changed saddles. Loveless was at home and he talked to Chet while the latter prepared to set out again.

"The roundup will be done in another week," Loveless said. "I want you to go back to Rock Springs after that, Chet."

"I've been there long enough for you to pre-empt that now," Chet said. "I don't want to go back to Rock Springs now, Barney."

"I've got to put a hay crew down there right away," Loveless announced. "You'd do me a favor if you'd go down an' look after things. I'm goin' to loan you the money to pre-empt that place anyhow, Chet. You could stay there through the hayin'."

"An' then next winter an' then go on roundup again next spring an' then hay next summer, I suppose," Chet said.

"Well, what's the matter with that?" Loveless asked. "Chet, you could borrow some money from Claypool an' run some stock out of the Rock Springs. You're goin' to be elected sheriff in November, sure as shootin'. Claypool has got that fixed up. All Rifle Rock is for you an' so are the

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nesters. Conejos is willin' to trade if we'll support—"

"I won't be runnin'," Chet said shortly. "I won't be here next fall. I've got to go on now, Barney. I'll stop on the way back. I've got somethin' to tell you."

"Go on then," Loveless said. "Stevens is waitin'."

Chet mounted his fresh horse and joined Stevens and they rode away. From the Screwplate to Rifle Rock neither of the men spoke.

In Rifle Rock the two went directly to the jail. Vance Murray hurried over from the Staghorn in time to help carry Ben Revilla's body into the office. He went out again to get a coroner's jury and the justice of the peace.

Stevens sat down on the bench that had held Ed Ames' body. There were still stains on the floor under the bench. Chet went to the arms cabinet in one corner and made a cursory inspection of the firearms there.

He was mildly interested in a gun and belt. He picked it up, pulled a shell from one of the belt loops and toyed with it. The shell was a forty-five. Chet carried a thirty-two twenty. He took out one of his own shells and made a comparison, put his shell back in his belt, and idly tugged at the lead in the forty-five. It gave under his pull, resisted a little, and then the cartridge came apart. Chet, thinking to gauge the powder charge, dumped the contents of the shell in his hand. It was sand. He put it back in the shell and reset the bullet. At that moment Murray came in.

"J.P. will be here in a minute," he said. "I've got a jury comin'. What you got there, Chet?"

"I don't know," Chet said.

Murray came over to him. "That's the gun Ames had when he tried to make his break," he announced. "We're keepin' it. Sort of a curiosity."

"It is at that," Chet agreed. "It missed fire when Ames tried to use it, didn't it?"

"Yeah," Vance Murray agreed. "It—here comes the J.P."

The inquest was brief. Stevens and Chet gave their evidence and the jury returned a verdict without leaving the room. The foreman and his colleagues were agreed that Ben Revilla came to his death at the hands of Clyde Stevens while attempting to steal Stevens' property.

"I'll talk to the prosecutor," the justice said. "He won't want to do anything about this. I know Clyde, but I'll have to talk to him anyhow. In the meantime I'll release you under your own recognizance."

Stevens grunted at that and murmured something about a hell of a fuss over killing a half-breed. At Chet's request Vance Murray agreed to look after the body of Ben Revilla. He would inform Alec Crow of Revilla's death and also see that Ben's sisters, both of whom were now in town, were told. Stevens had gone with the justice down to his real estate office to swear out warrants against Julio Tidd and Frank Oakes and Runkle.

"There's nothing to keep me then," Chet said to Murray. "I'll head back to the wagon. Joe's short-handed with me gone, an' we want to finish up. We just got a shirt-tail of country to work before we're done."

He bought a half pound of coffee and a box of crackers at the Bon Ton. Then he rode out of town.

CHET had plenty of time to make the Rock Springs before dark. He let his horse walk or trot as it chose, and paid only enough attention to stay on the road to Rock Creek. He was adding up the facts in his mind, and always he arrived at the same answer.

The sun was well toward the top of the western mesas when Chet struck Rock Creek. On an impulse he decided to ride past the Lairds'; and so he turned north, wondering why he had chosen to bring himself unnecessary pain. He had gone a mile and was dropping back toward the creek again when he saw smoke.

It came from what must be Lairds' claim, and the first thing that Chet thought was that some vandal had fired the house. He put spurs to his horse and shook out into a dead run. Then he slowed to a trot, to a

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walk, and stopped. There, before him, was the well remembered house. Chet sent his horse along. As he approached the kitchen door opened and Sally Laird walked out and stood on the stoop.

Chet could think of no words. "Hello, Sally," he said, at long last.

The girl was composed. "Won't you come in?" she asked.

Chet got down, led his horse up to the stoop, and stood looking at the girl. "You came back," he said inanely.

Sally smiled. "I came back," she said.

"Are you goin' to stay?" Chet asked.

The smile left the girl's face. "I don't know," she answered. "I thought . . . I heard what happened, Chet."

Chet had regained some part of his composure. He nodded, his face troubled. "About Ed Ames?" he asked.

"Yes." Sally Laird looked away and then back to Chet again. "Perhaps now they won't . . . perhaps there will be peace in this country, Chet."

The man's face became suddenly stern. "Sally," he said brusquely, "Ed Ames didn't kill your father. I thought he did an' I took him in, but Ames didn't do it."

Sally's eyes were wide. "Then . . ."

"I know who did," Chet said.

The girl stepped down from the stoop and came up to Chet. She put her hand on his arm, almost timidly. "They wanted me to stay in Ohio," she said. "Chet, couldn't you let it go? Couldn't you . . . couldn't we go somewhere and try to forget these terrible things? Couldn't we, Chet?"

Chet released the reins he held and covered the girl's hand with his own. "Sally," he said miserably, "why did you come back?"

"Because . . ." she began and then said hastily, "Don't make me tell you why I came back, Chet."

"Did you come back because of me?" Chet's voice was hoarse.

Sally Laird lowered her eyes. It was answer enough.

"I ain't worth it," Chet said. "I'm no good, Sally. I thought, one time, maybe I could amount to somethin'. I never will. I've got a job to finish, Sally, an' when I get it done you wouldn't want to look at me."

"Chet," the girl looked at him steadily in the face and now it was Chet's turn to avert his eyes, "couldn't you let it go? For me, Chet?"

Chet's face showed the strain that held him. It was in his voice when he answered. "I've thought an' thought," he said. "All last night an' today I've thought. There can't be peace in the country . . . Sally, it isn't just that. Your father was my friend—that's part of it—but there's things between me an' this fellow that I can't lay down. I'm human, Sally. Don't you see?"

"And you would rather have your revenge on this man than to be with me?" the girl asked slowly. "You mean to kill him, don't you, Chet?"

"I meant to," Chet answered. "I meant to kill him."

"I can't stop you, Chet." Sally's voice was sorrowful. "But how can you take justice into your own hands, Chet?"

"I don't know," Chet answered. "I don't know what I'll do. Why did you come back, Sally? Why didn't you stay back there where you were, an' let me alone?"

SUDDENLY the girl was close to Chet, her arms about his neck, her cheek pressed against his chest. "I'm afraid for you," she whispered. "You're all I have. Dad is dead; killed in this awful country. Promise me, Chet. Promise that you'll let it go. We'll go away. We'll go somewhere and be together. There will be peace and—"

She stopped. Chet's arms had gone around her to hold her close. Now the arms relaxed and the girl stepped back out of them. "You won't," she said. "It's no use, is it?"

"I've got to think," Chet said hoarsely.

The girl stepped further away. "I haven't any right to interfere," she said slowly. "That's it, isn't it? You were right—I shouldn't have come back. I should have stayed away. You were right."

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Chet almost groaned. "You don't understand it, Sally," he said. "It isn't just me. That's part of it. If a man had kicked you down into the alley you'd want to get even; but that isn't all of it."

Sally looked at him with wide, unbelieving eyes.

"This fellow killed your father," Chet continued. "He's the man that's behind all of it. If I let this go, there'll never be peace in the country as long as he's alive. All the folks, all the little men, will have it hangin' over them—death, an' bein' scared and hidin' around, never able to walk out into the open. Don't you understand, Sally? Can't you see it?"

"I can understand that what I offered you wasn't enough," the girl said. "You'll do what you think you must do. Goodbye, Chet. I won't see you again."

She turned abruptly and went into the house. The door closed. Chet Minor stood staring at the blank wood of the door. He shook his head as though to clear it. He would call her back. He would tell her that it was all right; he would do whatever she wanted him to do. He took a breath to make that call and then let it go again. He could not. Some things a man stood for. Some things a man must do regardless of what was offered him or of what happened after he had done them.

Chet turned away from the closed door and slowly, as though he were an old man, he mounted his horse. The horse turned, took a tentative step and then, more briskly, moved toward the west, toward the Rock Springs camp. . . .

In the Rock Springs cabin Chet put his saddle blanket down on the dusty mattress of the bunk. He made his supper on the crackers and coffee he had brought. Down in the corral the horse munched hay and drank from the trough. Up in the cabin, while the moonless night grew black, Chet watched the light of the fire showing through the cracks of the stove. The fire died away and still Chet Minor sat, looking at the empty blackness, thinking.

In the morning he went on, riding north. It was still early when he pulled his horse to a stop at the Screwplate headquarters, dismounted, and walked to the door. Before Chet reached it Barney Loveless opened the door and came out.

"Come down off yore high horse, did you?" Barney asked testily. "Got a minute to spare for the old man this mornin'?"

"I've got to talk to you, Barney," Chet answered.

"Come in an' talk then," Loveless invited him.

INSIDE the headquarters, Chet sat down on a bench. Barney pulled a chair around and sat down across it, his arms on the back. "Well," he commanded, "break down an' talk. Get it off yore chest."

"Barney," Chet said, "I know who killed Doc Laird."

"Ames killed him," Loveless stated. "Everybody knows that."

"No," Chet shook his head. "Powell Overman killed him."

"Overman?" Loveless came up from the chair with the exclamation.

"Powell Overman," Chet agreed. "Sit down, Barney."

Loveless sat down again, staring at Chet. Chet continued, his voice calm.

"It was Powell Overman. I'll tell you how I know. Overman had been foolin' around with Rosa Revilla. Rosa went out with Ben to the claim he took. She was goin' to have a baby. Doc Laird looked after her. Yesterday, before he died, Ben told me that Rosa had told the doctor who the father of her baby was an' the doctor had promised to see the man an' make him look after her an' the kid.

"The doctor went to the Triangle to see Powell. I know he did. Sally told me, an' she said her father was worried about somethin'. Laird went to Powell an' told him that he'd have to take care of Rosa an' the kid.

"Likely the doctor threatened Powell some. Anyhow Powell was afraid of Laird. He had to get him out of the way. When Doc Laird was killed we went out, Laramie an' Joe an me, an' cut sign. We followed along the tracks we'd found, an' there was

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